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# KUNAPIPI

VOLUME IV NUMBER 2  
1982

**Kunapipi**



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VOLUME IV NUMBER 2  
1982

*Kunapipi* is a bi-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The journal is the bulletin for the European branch of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. As such it offers information about courses, conferences, visiting scholars and writers, scholarships, and literary competitions.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet and should be accompanied by a return envelope.

All correspondence — manuscripts, books for review, inquiries — should be sent to:

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# Kunapipi

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*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal's emblem is to be found on an aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.

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# The Room

She was sitting on the edge of the ottoman; her feet curled up underneath her; her black shoes placed neatly on the carpet below. She was sitting perfectly still. She was listening to the quietness of the room.

She listened intently. Her head cocked first to one side, then to the other. The room lay all around her; quiet and still. Like a huge waiting animal — all eyes, and ears, and knowing. She couldn't keep out of it. How could she? It attracted her... It beckoned to her through its closed door...

'Come in,' it said. 'Come in... Come and see my secrets.'

So today she had opened the door and gone in — timidly and carefully — placing her shoes on the floor so as not to soil the ottoman. And there she sat. And the room was waiting and watching.

Facing her, was a walnut dressing table. It had stocky legs and a long silvered mirror. A silver hairbrush lay on one side of the table. A silver comb on the other. In the middle, sat a squat, taunting, jewellery box.

The room was waiting for a decision. But she didn't give one. Not immediately. She sat on the ottoman a few minutes longer. The room waited patiently. But at last, it could wait no more; it urged and pleaded and prodded at her. It loomed up and all around her — until she was forced to decide.

She stood up and padded over to the dressing table. She pulled back the cushioned stool. She sat down. Her hand hovered momentarily in the air... Then it came swiftly down, and the brush was grasped.

The room relaxed. It flowed gently away from her. It curled up contentedly in a corner. It pretended to go to sleep.

She looked down at the brush and relaxed her grip. She traced along the silver handle with her fingertips. She lifted the brush up in her hands. She pressed it firmly against her face. Her eyelids dropped softly onto her cheeks. The silver was cold. It was hard. It was unyielding. But it was beautiful.

She opened her eyes and looked in the mirror. Soft grey eyes stared encouragingly at her. So she turned the brush over and started to drag it

through her hair. The bristles bit into her scalp as she tugged... But that didn't matter at all.

When she had done, she put the brush down on the exact spot it had come from. Her eyes lingered on it for a moment, then moved on to the jewellery box. She looked at the little gold handle, the tiny keyhole.

She reached out and tried the lid. It was locked. She lifted the box up. No key. She set the box down and looked long and hard at the keyhole. 'There must be a key somewhere,' she whispered. 'But where?'

Under the mirror, there was a wooden knob. She stretched out an arm and touched it. A drawer slid open. She slipped her fingers into it. She lifted up the silk handkerchiefs... There was no key there.

She banged the drawer shut and scowled in the mirror.

Then her eyes caught sight of the silver comb. She reached out and picked it up... The room stirred gently at her feet... Underneath the comb, lay a tiny black key.

She lifted it up and jammed it into the keyhole. A quick jerk; and the lid sprung open.

A solitary strand of pearls nestled inside. Her fingers crept over to touch them. They were smooth, and white, and inviting.

She picked them up and ran them over her hand. She fastened them around her neck. She jumped up and stared defiantly at the mirror. Grey eyes laughed mockingly back. At her throat, the white pearls snuggled, smooth and warm.

She tossed back her head and threw her hands to her throat.

Suddenly, there were white pearls everywhere: in her hair; tumbling down to the floor; rolling under the dressing table; trickling silently towards the door.

She threw herself onto her hands and knees and tried desperately to pick them up. But her fingers were clumsy. And her hair got in her eyes. And, over there, in the corner, the room gave out a low, throaty, laugh.

She sat down defeated. Her cheeks burned hot and red. Her hair clung wetly to her forehead. She had only found ten pearls. What would she do now.

Tears started to sting at her eyes and she stabbed at them with her fists. The door opened. She looked up through her tears and saw two faces staring down at her. One was contorted. Beyond recognition. The other was inquisitive. Like a mouse.

'Look what she's done now!' screamed the contorted face.

'You can't really blame her,' said the inquisitive face. 'You'll have to be more careful... You'll have to keep your things out of her reach, that's all.'

'B...But,' fumed the contorted face. 'I had locked them up... They were locked up safe and sound... What more could I do?'

But the inquisitive face wasn't listening. It was looking at the child on the floor. 'Come on Amy,' it was saying. 'Give the pearls back to your sister.'

The little girl stood up. She tiptoed over to the contorted face. She held out a shaking hand and offered up the ten pearls.

The sister looked down at the wet hair and the tear-stained face, and she relaxed. She wiped the child's brow and she took the offered pearls.

The mother picked up the black shoes with a sigh. She took the little girl by the hand and they left the room. The sister followed.

Half way down the stairs, the little girl turned to look back. Behind the door, the room was curling up; it was closing its eyes; it was falling asleep... Was the waiting and watching over now?

## S. Tunde Gondocz

---

### ME AND MINE

When I was young  
All things were one of two things  
They were either me or not me.

As I grew older  
Things began to be a part of me  
It became harder to distinguish between me and not me.

And when you came along  
You were so much a part of me  
It left me baffled as to what was me and not me.

And as you left me  
I realized you would never be mine  
I was very sad, but even more confused...

For if me equals mine,  
I suppose not mine equals not me,  
And if so, what were we?

## Ken Duffin

---

### RECURRING POEM

You enter my dreams  
laughing and giggling  
immense, symbolic breasts  
that burst beneath my hands.  
You cry  
and my face burns;  
speak  
and my ears explode;  
touch  
and my hands grow  
from the stumps of another man's arms.

When I wake, I hear  
a crow — kissing fog  
from his mate's wild eyes.

# Lesley Choyce

---

## ANGER MAKES A COMEBACK

I am at work in the garden, the wind is horrendous.  
Tomato vines break,  
the broccoli cowers,  
only certain weeds can endure the blast.  
A helicopter slices sideways across the wind  
searching the sea for fishing boats  
caught unaware in the gale.

My anger comes back to me in the wind.  
I had shucked it off  
years ago,  
thrown it North toward the tundra.

It races back to me now  
like razored bits of glass  
here in the frozen summer  
where the North cuts me down  
with my own ancient weaponry.

## THE GARDEN

You arrived here on our ward  
late one sunday afternoon.  
They stationed you by the western window  
and I studied your scalp,  
planted with perfect rows of seedlings

carefully scalped into the barren topsoil  
of your skin.

It could have been Kansas in late spring,  
the crop so orderly, so promising;  
but it was late in your year  
and I worried if your stoney field  
could sustain the harvest.

DIANA BRYDON

---

## Wordsworth's Daffodils: A Recurring Motif in Contemporary Canadian Literature

It is a commonplace of criticism in the new literatures in English that colonial writers experienced difficulty in adapting the English language and English literary forms to the very different natural environments they experienced in all parts of the Commonwealth. Anglocentric attitudes dictated the belief that Australia was the antipodes, the reverse of the true and Northern hemisphere, that North America was a wilderness that must be turned into a garden, that India and Africa were heathen to be converted or savage to be tamed. The native inhabitants of these countries were viewed as part of their barbaric landscapes, equally in need of change to meet English standards. Finally, an imported and in the colonial context an ossifying, Romantic tradition prevented immigrants and the native-born alike from seeing their natural environments with native eyes. As the chief representative of this Romantic tradition, Wordsworth looms large.

The story of Wordsworth's influence could fill several books and is not my concern here. Instead, this paper examines Wordsworth as he is used

by various Canadian writers as a symbol of an Anglocentric poetic tradition and of an Anglocentric educational system which, ironically, are usually mis-interpreted and mis-managed by Canadians, but which nonetheless often function as scapegoats to focus an anti-British animosity. During my reading in Canadian literature, I have been particularly struck by the numerous, specific references to Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' poem, 'I wandered lonely as a cloud', and the ways it has been used as a fictional reference point either to undermine British authority in order to substitute the beginnings of a local tradition or — very rarely — in order to affirm a continuity of traditions.<sup>1</sup>

The 'Daffodils' poem represents a belief in Nature's beneficence that is easier to hold in the cultivated, thoroughly humanized landscape of the English Lakes District than it is in Northern British Columbia, the Canadian Prairies, Newfoundland, or Margaret Laurence's Ghana. As Aldous Huxley points out in 'Wordsworth in the Tropics', 'The Wordsworthian who exports this pantheistic worship of Nature to the tropics is liable to have his religious convictions somewhat rudely disturbed'. The jungle, and even the great forests of temperate lands, Huxley suggests, are: 'foreign, appalling, fundamentally and utterly inimical to intruding man.'<sup>2</sup> He concludes that the Wordsworthian worship of nature is not only inappropriate to the various colonial places, but also to our times, in which a new mythology of evolution and scientific discovery that depends upon recognizing the Otherness of Nature, is replacing the Wordsworthian habit of seeing Nature in man's image.

Margaret Laurence's short story, 'The Rain Child', from *The Tomorrow-Tamer* collection (1963), gives fictional expression to Huxley's criticism of Wordsworth through the thoughts of Violet Nidden, an English school teacher who has spent twenty-two years in Africa:

Once, when we were taking *Daffodils*, Kwaale came to class with her arms full of wild orchids for me. How absurd Wordsworth seemed here then. I spoke instead about Akan poetry, and read them the drum prelude *Akyantanyane* in their own tongue as well as the translation. Miss Povey, hearing of it, took decided umbrage.

Here two opposed attitudes to the proper education of African students are embodied in the two expatriate English school teachers. On the one hand, Miss Povey, like President Hastings Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, who has just modelled an élite school in his country on Eton, believes that the British tradition of a classical education must not be deviated from. On the other hand, Miss Nidden appreciates Akan culture and strives to give her students a sense of the best of both worlds. Significantly, Miss

Povey grows 'zinnias and nasturtiums, and spends hours trying to coax an exiled rosebush into bloom' (112), whereas Miss Neddien will have no English flowers, preferring the native jungle lily and poinsettia. In this story, Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' symbolizes the inappropriateness of a traditional British education to African needs, and the blindness of at least some English educators to African worth.

This story about various kinds of exile centres about the image of the uprooted plant that cannot take root in new soil. Dr Quansah uses it explicitly to speak of his African wife's inability to adjust to England (120), and implicitly it refers to his daughter's difficulties in adjusting to her native land after her education in England. To Laurence, Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' appears to be another species of uprooted plant, meaningful in its natural environment but at best meaningless, at worst, insidiously dangerous, when transplanted into the foreign soil of young colonial minds.

Laurence uses this poem even more obviously as a symbol of British imperialism in her most recent novel, *The Diviners* (1974). When Christie glances at Morag's homework, he explodes:

'What in hell is this crap? I wandered lonely as a cloud. This Wordsworth, now, he was a pansy, girl, or no, maybe a daffodil? Clouds don't wander lonely, for the good christ's sake. Any man daft enough to write a line like that, he wanted his head looked at, if you ask me. Look here, I'll show you a poem, now, then.'<sup>4</sup>

In context, Christie's outburst clearly carries authorial endorsement, yet it is also ironic that the alternative he offers is another old world poet, Ossian, who provides an equally out-dated rhetoric. Ossian's value for Christie lies in his supposed roots in Gaelic, Christie's lost ancestral language, because Christie himself speaks only the language of his people's conquerors, those 'bloody liars', the English. Morag's struggle in *The Diviners* is of course to find her own voice as a Canadian woman and to write her own fictions. Neither Wordsworth nor Ossian can help her to find that voice. Instead, she turns eventually, only half humourously, to the Canadian pioneer naturalist, Catherine Parr Traill, for guidance in discovering how to name the elements of her own heritage. Wordsworth's daffodils are replaced by butter-and-eggs, goldenrod, 'little pink whatsernames' and Devil's Paintbrush (170).

The political emphasis in Laurence's use of Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' recurs in two of Canada's best plays of the period: George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1970) and Michael Cook's *Jacob's Wake* (1975). In Ryga's play, Wordsworth's romanticism emerges significantly with the teacher's insistence on conformity. As a 'nightmare babble' of voices



assault Rita's troubled mind, she remembers her teacher's voice demanding:

Say after me! I wandered lonely as a cloud, that floats on high o'er vales and hills ...  
when all at once I saw a crowd ... a melting pot ...<sup>2</sup>

The threat to Rita's own Indian culture is dramatically realized in this conflation of literature and the ideology of British superiority it supports, however unintentionally. This alien British romanticism, whose foreign words and concepts Rita is continually chastised for forgetting, contrasts sharply with the more colloquial and indigenous poetry of Rita's own speech and that of her father, David Joe. When Rita comes into school fresh from the out of doors, she tells her teacher: 'The sun is in my skin, Miss Donahue. The leaves is red and orange, and the wind stopped blowin' an hour ago', only to be brought up short by the teacher's Gradgrindian question: 'Rita! What is a noun?' (63), to which Rita has no answer. Two radically different approaches to life and art are at loggerheads here: ironically, Rita is probably more in tune with the spirit of Wordsworth's poem than her teacher, who sees the poem only as a tool for imposing an alien grammar and detached appreciation of landscape on her recalcitrant students. Miss Donahue makes it clear that she is not interested in Rita's dreams or the poetry of her people, but only in compelling Rita to memorize, without understanding if necessary, the verse of the imperial centre, so that she may disappear into the cultural melting pot. It is a further irony that a teacher with an Irish name should be engaged in such a colonizing role.

In addition to her inability to perceive the potential for a translation into Canadian terms of Wordsworth's vision in 'Daffodils', the teacher damns herself even more definitively by compelling the class to recite from Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat*: 'A jug of wine, a loaf of bread and thou beside me ... singing in the wilderness.' Rita's bawdy common sense shatters her teacher's comfortable sentimentality by reminding her of how much Fitzgerald has left out. Rita reports: 'Jaimie said, <To heck with the wine an' loaf ... Let's have some more of this here thou>' (65). *Rita Joe* makes it clear that Fitzgerald's smug Victorian wilderness is as far as it is possible to go from the wilderness Rita knows as someone born and raised in the bush or from the 'wilderness' of the white world's city that finally destroys her.

Rita's deflation of the *Rubaiyat*'s pretensions anticipates the action of *Jacob's Wake*, where the pseudo gentility of Mary and Wayne, who quote Wordsworth back and forth between themselves, clashes against Winston's deliberate crudity. Winston claims: 'I swear because I like it.

It sounds good and it protects me from your kind of literacy.'<sup>6</sup> Their kind of literacy spawns conversations like this:

MARY: If only the child were the father of the man.

WAYNE: Then I could wish my days to be bound each to each by natural piety.

Winston's response? 'Jesus, I've sired a book of sayings' (99).

Earlier, Winston has snatched up one of the student compositions Mary is marking for school in order to mock her work. What he reads there confirms the pattern we have been tracing:

'Daffodils' by William Wordsworth. By Mary Freak for Miss Blackburn, Grade 6  
'Daffodils' is a poem all about yellow flowers called daffodils. The poet is flying in an aeroplane and looking down through the clouds, he sees... (48)

In this harsh Newfoundland world, with its violent snowstorms and crazy fundamentalist guilt, Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' and the inventive criticism of Mary Freak seem out of place. Because the characters speak in their own dialect, the literariness of Wordsworth's language appears more pronounced. It is no longer the language of ordinary men, if it ever was in Canada. His two defenders are, predictably, the spinster school teacher and the politician who has just sold 'the last fifty thousand acres of standing timber' to the newest imperialists, the Japanese (100). Wayne is not at all squeamish about selling his birthright in such a socially acceptable fashion, but he does object to his father's openly bawdy delight in his mother's sexuality. When criticized, Wayne's father comments: 'He allus wor squeamish ... I suppose that's what they calls sensitivity' (29). As in *Rita Joe*, an appreciation of Wordsworth is linked, however unfairly, with puritanism and sexual repression and with traditional authority and political repression. Cook's message seems to be that when the literary culture is not indigenous, it creates ignorant louts of those — like Winston — who instinctively reject it, and hypocrites of those — like Wayne — who accept it. The educational system promoting this literature appears further and further removed from the lives of the people. The choice in Cook's world is a bitter one. I see it in the terms established by Sheila Watson for talking about the vision set forward in *The Double Hook*: both the novel and the play are

about how people are driven, how if they have no art, how if they have no tradition, how if they have no ritual, they are driven in one of two ways, either towards violence or towards insensibility — if they have no mediating rituals which manifest themselves in what I suppose we call art forms.<sup>7</sup>

There are no mediating rituals in Cook's world. There were once in Rita Joe's, but both the traditional ways of her people as embodied in her father, and the traditional ways of the Roman Catholic church as represented by the priest are exposed as ineffectual in contemporary Vancouver.

What remains is little enough, a potential only, in the tough colloquial speech of Jaimie Paul in *Rita Joe* and of the grandfather in *Wake*. The compelling poetry in *Jacob's Wake* in particular comes not from the few remembered Wordsworthian tags shored against the ruins of British respectability, but from the mad Skipper's vision of hell:

But what's mortal man when nature sets her face agin him. Black as hell it wor ...  
And the ice buckling and rafting beneath us, laughing. I swear. Laughing ... Hell  
isn't fire, boy. It's ice. Black, bitter, cold. Empty. Filled with the frozen breath of  
fallen men. (118)

And it comes as well from his rhymes to navigate this hell:

North nor East  
And South South West  
From the Round Head Isles  
To Cape Bonaville  
Steer it clear  
And steer it true  
And the same will take ye  
To Baccalieu (137)

Both reveal an understanding and respect for Nature as Other that denies the Wordsworthian tenet that 'Nature never did betray the heart that loved her',<sup>5</sup> while following his injunction to employ a language actually spoken by men. What stands out, however, is the specific use of Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' to condemn an inappropriate educational system and the poetic orthodoxies it imposes.

We have now seen this motif at work in a short story, a novel, and two plays. What does a poet make of it? In Earle Birney's 'Cartagena de Indias' (1962-63) it appears to reinforce a kind of self-mocking irony. The poet has been walking through this ancient Colombian city in search of a bridge from his 'stupid wish/ to their human acceptance'.<sup>6</sup> Eventually he finds what he is looking for in a giant pair of concrete shoes, built in the memory of their poet, Luis Lopez, who said of his townsmen that they inspired 'that love a man has/ for his old shoes'. At this moment of achieved communion, Birney says:

I bought the book – walked back  
sat on the curb happier than Wordsworth  
gazing away at his daffodils  
Discarded queen – I thought – I love you too.

Here Birney is placing himself in the romantic tradition of epiphanic vision or 'spots in time', while modifying it to suit changed circumstances. Interestingly, my students have unanimously felt that this comparison serves to make Birney's persona slightly ridiculous. Behind this element of self-mockery, however, I detect a serious revision of the romantic tradition: Birney finds his epiphany not in the natural world but in the heart of a crowded city and in the expression of shared communal values rather than in a lonely wandering away from them. Unfortunately, and here the bitter notes of Laurence, Ryga, and Cook appear again, he cannot find this kind of communal valuing of poetry in Canada. There is a sadness in his envying of Luis Lopez, '— and him I envy/ I who am seldom read by my townsmen', that lingers after the Wordsworthian euphoria of discovery has passed.

My final example follows Birney in incorporating and revising rather than attacking the Wordsworthian model as embodied in 'Daffodils'. Like *Rita Joe*, Hugh Hood's novel, *A New Athens* (1977) connects Wordsworth's poem with memories of schoolroom recitation, but instead of mocking the poem's romanticism, Hood's character-narrator Matt Goderich takes it as the starting point for seeing his own immediate surroundings more clearly and more intensely. Goderich reverses the movement followed by Laurence's Morag Gunn in *The Diviners* by starting in an Ontario field naming the flowers according to their common names — indeed many of the names are the same — and then moving on to see them within the larger British literary tradition.<sup>18</sup> Wondering why he feels so virtuous reciting his list of wildflower names, Matt suddenly thinks

of the shorter poems of Wordsworth and of Sister Matilda making us recite them in piping chorus. 'And then my heart with pleasure fills/ And dances with the daffodils.' (17)

'Aha,' Matt concludes, 'let teacher be your Nature' (17). This reversal of Wordsworth's famous dictum makes the problem we have been tracing instantly clear. If the Canadian or any colonial tries to make Nature his teacher as Wordsworth urges him to do, then he must reject the harmonious and beneficent vision and English literary language of the daffodil poem as false to his own experience, but if he takes European

civilization and tradition as his starting point, he has no trouble accepting 'Daffodils' — precisely because he is no longer essentially Wordsworthian in his sensibilities: teacher has become his nature.

Because Hood believes that culture is continuous, it is the most natural thing in the world for his spokesman, Matt, to learn to see his region of Canada through remembering Wordsworth's lines about seeing the daffodils. Here, the poem represents a living and vital tradition as opposed to the effete and deadening influence it exerted in the drama. Significantly, Hood, like Birney, refers to the final lines of the poem, in which the poet remembers his vision and speaks of its lasting effect on him, whereas Laurence, Ryga and Cook quote from the poem's beginning, where the poet is wandering without direction through the landscape, seeing for the first time with the outer eye rather than remembering, and thus seeing with what Wordsworth calls 'the inner eye'.

As represented by Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' poem, then, the English romantic literary tradition and the Canadian educational system promoting it have been presented as absurd, threatening, effete, falsely genteel, irrelevant, and potentially inspiring. What has interested me in this paper is the frequency of this poem's appearance as the representative of an entire imperial tradition in Canadian literature of the late nineteenth sixties and seventies, and the comic associations it usually conveys. It seems to function primarily as a scapegoat for Canadian hostility toward an imposed English vision of the proper relations between man and nature, providing yet another example of the creative mis-readings of one's forebears that are necessary for the continuation of any literary tradition, but perhaps particularly necessary for a colony, which must break old patterns if it is to find its own voice.

## NOTES

1. Canadian writers are not of course alone in using the 'Daffodils' poem as symbol of a tradition. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o cites this poem as his first piece of evidence in his condemnation of the Eurocentric educational system in Kenya in his collection of essays, *Writers in Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1980), p.4. Several West Indians have remarked to me in conversation that they were given daffodils instead of bougainvillea at school. The use of this motif throughout the Commonwealth suggests that the larger context of new writing in English could be helpful for a consideration of Canadian concerns and trends.
2. Aldous Huxley, 'Wordsworth in the Tropics', *Collected Essays* (Chatto & Windus, 1958), pp.1-10.

3. Margaret Laurence, 'The Rain Child', *The Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories* (1963; Toronto: McClelland & Stewart New Canadian Library, 1976), p.107. Hereafter cited by page.
4. Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (1974; Toronto: Bantam, 1975), p.63. Hereafter cited by page.
5. George Ryga, *The Ecstasy of Rán Joe* (1970; Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1976), p.76. Hereafter cited by page.
6. Michael Cook, *Jacob's Wake* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1975), p.98. Hereafter cited by page.
7. Sheila Watson, 'What I'm Going To Do', in *Sheila Watson: A Collection, Open Letter*, 3/1 (Winter 1974-75), p.183.
8. William Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey', *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, New Edition, revised by Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.163.
9. Earle Birney, 'Castagena de Indias', *Ghost in the Wheel: Selected Poems of Earle Birney* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), p.114.
10. Hugh Hood, *A New Achebe* (Toronto: Oheron, 1977), p.16. Hereafter cited by page.

## Glen Sorestad

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### AUTUMNAL PRELUDE

This morning the backyard  
vibrates with the flash and pipe  
of unfamiliar birds. The poplars  
and the cotoneaster hedge tremble  
with the host of newcomers that feed  
on berries of red elder or mountain ash.

Others clamber the limbs  
of the poplar and the silver maple  
and pick parasites in the frenzy  
of songbirds in migration.

Today's visitors are the first reminder  
that summer's short hold on the prairies  
is weakening into the long grip of winter.

## SMOKE HAZE IN SASKATOON

Without warning smoke  
from northern forest fires  
has drifted south to shroud  
the cityscape in eerie grey.  
The smell of burning spruce and pine  
overwhelms and reddens eyes.

This unexpected coup  
is a pungent reminder that we  
live in a small southern portion  
of this land; the less occupied  
three-quarters has just sent us  
a sharp message.

Perhaps a century ago  
the city awoke to a similar haze  
rich with the sting of prairie grass  
as hunters of the buffalo bones  
blackened the plains with fire  
to uncover the bones and turn  
extinction to a final profit.

Smoke speaks the voice of destruction  
and telescopes all time and place  
into this morning of acrid grey.

## LIAR

His heart sank with a rush;  
in the eyes of his only son  
the lie lay solid as stone.

In the suddenness of discovery  
his breath clawed and held  
and he struggled to the surface  
from the confusion that threatened  
to pull him under, a hot surge  
that urged him to reach out  
seize this lie, strike it down  
shake it until it became truth.

The classroom's stale heat  
stirred vague memories of shame  
and in the eyes of his child  
the lie gleamed with sharpness  
a reflection of pools of the past  
and in the silence of his shame  
he saw the lie become his own.



# Salman Rushdie

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## INTERVIEW

This interview was recorded in Gothenburg, Sweden, on 5 September 1982. The questions were prepared by Jean-Pierre Durix in collaboration with Kirsten Holst Petersen, Jacqueline Bardolph, Anna Rutherford and Carole Durix.

JPD: *What were the circumstances in which you wrote *Midnight's Children*? Did you write it in England or in India?*

I wrote it in England. I went to India and Pakistan for five months before starting it. I was going to Pakistan with my family at that time. But I also

felt that if I was going to embark on something of that scale, then I could not entirely rely on my memory. So I visited a lot of the places that I had been to before and that I knew I would want to use, and also some of the places which I suspected I might want, for instance Benares, where I had never been before. I had never heard of this curious edifice there — a hostel for bereaved women. I discovered it by chance. In Benares, you can hire a fishing-boat; a fisherman will row you down the Ganges and you can look at all the palaces. At one point, we heard the sound of wailing floating towards us over the waters. It got louder and louder and then died away. I discovered that it came from an old Maharajah's palace which had been taken over by the government and made a hostel for widows who came to Benares to mourn. They literally had to do nothing to be there except mourn. I suppose that if they didn't mourn, they got thrown out... Because I had already by that stage had the notion of using the nickname Widow for Mrs Gandhi, the widows' hostel suddenly seemed very useful, and so, in the book, it became a sort of prison. But then, after that trip, I just went back to England and wrote the novel.

*JPD: Were there preliminary sketches to this book on which you obviously must have worked for a long time? How did it take on that shape?*

It came in a very chaotic way. I had little bits of it, to begin with. The first chapter particularly was the first story that I had. And I had various fragments of narrative to do with Bombay. Originally there was only one child. And then it became two children when I decided to swap them. Then I thought that you can't have just two children born in an hour in a country like India. It must be more. And if it's more than two, why these two? I did mathematical calculations about the birth-rate of India, with calculators, and worked out that, in fact, a thousand and one children an hour is roughly accurate. If anything, it's a little on the low side. There are probably twelve or thirteen hundred children being born every hour. So the population — allowing for the death rate — is increasing at something like six or seven hundred an hour. Having discovered that there was going to be a very large number of children, I had the idea of spreading them across the hour and giving them differing kinds of magical gifts depending on the point during the hour at which they were born. During the first draft of the book which took, by far, the longest part of the writing — probably two and a half out of the four and a half years of it — I was completely uncontrolled. It was enormously long, very

over-written and loose. In a way I was just seeing what happened. I find that I've always done this, even when the book has not been quite of that size. The first draft is really a way of finding out what the book is about. In the end, I had an enormous typescript, probably a thousand pages, which was completely undisciplined. But, out of that, I found myself putting the story into the first person, as a way of controlling what was otherwise a mess of material. And the moment I put it into the first person, I really thought that it had begun to work. Then I wrote something which was reasonably close to the final version in about another year, and just added little layers to it for quite a long time after that.

*JPD: How do you situate yourself in relation to other English-speaking Indian writers, people like Mulk Raj Anand, Narayan or Raja Rao?*

Not at all really. This idea that there is a school of Indian-British fiction is a sort of mistake. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand and Narayan have many more affinities to Indian writers in the Indian languages than they do to a writer like me who just happens to be writing in English. Apart from the accident that we all use English, I don't think there's a great deal in common. *Midnight's Children* was partly conceived as an opportunity to break away from the manner in which India had been written about in English, not just by Indian writers but by Western writers as well.

*AR: What about Desani's All About H. Hatterr?*

That's one book that I did very much like. I'm not sure that it's a novel, or what it is... But I think it's an extraordinary book. I found it by accident in a bookshop, in those grey Penguins, and it seemed so far ahead of its time I could not believe he had never written anything else since, except philosophy. The way in which the English language is used in that book is very striking; it showed me that it was possible to break up the language and put it back together in a different way. To talk about minor details, one thing it showed me was the importance of punctuating badly. In order to allow different kinds of speech rhythms or different kinds of linguistic rhythms to occur in the book, I found I had to punctuate it in a very peculiar way, to destroy the natural rhythms of the English language; I had to use dashes too much, keep exclaiming, putting in three dots, sometimes three dots followed by semi-colons followed by three dashes... That sort of thing just seemed to help to

dislocate the English and let other things into it. Desani does that all the time in *Hatterr*. Apparently Céline does it as well, in French. At that time, I had never read Céline. But one of the American critics, because there were so many dashes in *Midnight's Children*, assumed that I had got the dash from Céline... His books use dashes instead of full stops, more or less all the way through.

*JPD: What are the European writers that you feel you have a lot in common with?*

I think what happens with most writers, and perhaps more with displaced writers, is that they select, partly consciously and partly not consciously, a family of writers to belong to. And it just seems to me that there is another great tradition in world literature which really hasn't been discussed in the way that the realistic tradition has been. In almost every country and in almost every literature there has been, every so often, an outburst of this large-scale fantasized, satiric, anti-epic tradition, whether it was Rabelais or Gogol or Boccaccio... Wherever you look, you can find examples of this kind of sensibility. That simply was the literature that I liked to read. So it seemed to me that it was also the literature that I would like to write.

*JPD: What is the importance of grotesque characters and of the Baroque in your works? How do you see characters shaping in your mind when you write a book?*

In two ways: they either come out of pieces of people that I knew, or they quite often come out of gestures or of small details of the character from which the rest of the character grows. In *Midnight's Children*, most of the characters are in some way broken. They are not fully rounded. It's to do partly with the fact that they are seen from one point of view. So you see them in the limited way that one human being would see another.

I just find myself writing grotesque characters. It's part of the fact that I think I write very badly when I write seriously. And the nature of comedy is to distort slightly.

*JPD: In Midnight's Children, there is a constant dialogue between some characters who attempt or pretend to be heroic and other characters who destroy that heroism. Sometimes there is a dialogue of this kind between the characters and the narrator. How important is this for you?*

The nature of heroism is one of the concerns of the book. It has a character who presents himself as a hero, although he is also aware that he isn't. And heroism is something that is very alive in Indian culture and narrative tradition. For instance, one real life incident, the Nanavati case, is very little changed in the book. The character of Commander Sabermati, and his wife, although their originals weren't neighbours of mine, remain substantially unaltered. And that did become a test-case for India, because there was this enormously good-looking, very popular and dashing young naval officer who was almost certain to become the next chief of the navy, who committed a murder, and everybody wanted him to get off, but, at the same time, they understood that he had killed somebody. There was terrible agony about this. It went on for years. And it got very political. In fact he was found not guilty by the first court that tried him. There is a curious rule in the Bombay judiciary — at least there was then —: if the jury came to a decision which the judge thought was idiotic, he could overrule and reverse it. And that's what happened in that case. The jury found him not guilty and the judge reversed the decision, and it then went to endless appeal courts. It eventually arrived at the President of India who was supposed to pardon him. Whether or not he would be pardoned became a very crucial issue. A woman is abducted by another man who then goes off and murders the abductor... There were newspaper articles at the time — or this may just be a false memory of mine — which compared the Nanavati story to the Ramayana story and said that, if this was Rama, would we be sending him to jail? So there was a kind of dispute between the laws of heroism and the rule of Law. In the end, he was sent to jail. And that was a major decision by India about itself. That kind of notion of the hero is still prevalent there. But it is not one that I subscribe to. And so the dispute between the two views exists in the book.

*JPD: How does a writer like yourself stand in relation to history and the problem of memory, of creating the memory?*

When I started writing the book, because, as I said, it was not then in the first person, I had a sort of Proustian idea that it must be possible simply to recreate, to bring the past back, unchanged, as if it had never been away, and found that it really was not what I could do. Instead of being a book of a Proustian kind, the novel became a novel about the past seen through memory, and about what memory did to it. It became a novel about memory, which is why the narrator is so suspect and makes all kinds of mistakes, some of which he perceives and some of which he does

not. When I was thinking about the book, I had a vivid memory of what it was like living in India during the Chinese war: how frightened everybody was and how the general belief was that the Chinese would be in New Delhi within a few days and we had better all start learning Chinese, and what absolute amazement people felt when the Chinese suddenly stopped and came no further. Anyway I remembered all this with great vividness and then realized that I could not possibly have been there because I would have been in school in England at the time. I wrote to my parents and said: 'Look! Was I there or wasn't I there? Was I on holiday?' And they said: 'No, you weren't here.' But even when I knew that I had not been there, my memory refused to believe it because it informed me that I had. This showed me that memory does play very extraordinary tricks on you. So that's why I made Saleem make that kind of mistake; and even when he realizes that the assassination of Gandhi happens at the wrong point in the book, he can't rearrange his memories, because to do so would unravel too much else. I found that I did not have total recall about the past, that I was only remembering certain things very vividly, sometimes accurately and sometimes not, that, because they were fragments of the past, they became somehow much more powerful, as though they were bits of archaeological remains one had discovered and from which one was trying to reconstruct what the vanished civilization was like. They became symbolic, absolutely trivial things which had no intrinsic value, they became great totems for me, which is another reason why this book is constructed in that fragmentary way. It tries to recognize the way in which memory operates: it exalts certain things which may be unimportant in themselves and become very important because they have lodged in your mind. And then history seen through that obviously becomes a rather odd thing: it becomes distorted. What seem to be irrelevant things become very big. What seem to be very big things are treated very slightly.

JPD: *What is the importance of digressions? How do they stand in relation to the whole economy of the novel?*

I think that they are absolutely crucial. There was some attempt made when the book was with the publishers to clean it up a bit and to centre it more on the main narrative. But I certainly could not have tolerated that because the digressions are almost the point of the book, in which the idea of multitude is a central notion. When I started writing, I just tried to explain one life, and it struck me more and more that, in order to

explain this life, you had to explain a vast amount of material which surrounded it, both in space and time. In a country like India, you are basically never alone. The idea of solitude is a luxury which only rich people enjoy. For most Indians, the idea of privacy is very remote. When people perform their natural functions in public, you don't have the same idea of privacy. So it seemed to me that people lived intermingled with each other in a way that perhaps they don't any more in the West, and that it was therefore idiotic to try and consider any life as being discrete from all other lives. I had to find some way in which that life — Saleem's — could be constantly surrounded by all the other lives that occasionally overwhelmed it and then receded and were shown to be connected with it in all kinds of ways, whether literal or metaphorical, political, social or sociological... So I found the book getting bigger. The logical extension of the phrase 'to understand one life you have to swallow a world' is that the book never finishes. So you have to find some convention for limiting it. But I wanted to show a life in the context of many other lives, some of which penetrated it, some of which simply existed at its periphery. And that's why the narrator keeps telling other stories.

There's another point, which I find myself making more and more, because the part of the book that's been most criticized is the end, the way in which the central character ends in despair. The thing that happens to him is that nothing much happens to him, despite all the hopes and the optimism of the beginning. Indian critics particularly began to see the decline of the narrator as the author's message, which of course it is partially. But it is only one part of the author's message. The other part, which, I think, has not been properly appreciated, has to do with the actual form of the book itself. I tried quite deliberately to make the form of the book a kind of opposite to what the narrative was saying. What I mean is that the optimism in the book seems to me to lie in its 'multitudinous' structure. It's designed to show a country or a society with an almost endless capacity for generating stories, events, new ideas, and constantly renewing, rebuilding itself. In the middle of that you have one rather tragic life. The two have to be seen together. And simply to say that the book despairs is to see it in too linear a way.

Indians are wonderful story-tellers; every Indian you talk to, if you let him, will tell you stories, for a long time. And I wanted to get some of that, the flavour of the told story, into the book, which is why I was very pleased when I introduced the device of having the book narrated to an audience. Padma is one of my favourite characters in the book, because

she was completely unplanned. In the first version, she appeared as a very minor character in the last fifteen or so pages; then, when the narrator began to 'tell' the book, she arrived and sat there, she simply demanded to be told the story and kept interrupting it, telling Saleem to get on with it. She became very important because she literally demanded to be important. And it's nice when a character does that and you feel that they've added something by doing it. Padma enabled the book to become an oral narrative, some kind of stylization of such a narrative, if you like. And that allowed the rhythms of the dialogue, the rhythms of the speech that I had originally invented for the dialogue sections to become the rhythm of the whole book.

*JPD: What kind of audience have you got in mind when you're writing a book like this? Have you got one? Who are you talking to?*

Well, *me* really. I had a strong belief when the book was being written that it would never be published. At that time, my track record was not good. I had published one novel which had not really distinguished itself, certainly not commercially. Actually the best reviews that it ever got were in France, where people quite strangely compared it to Voltaire. I could not understand why. But, in England, it was not compared to Voltaire. It was compared to less distinguished things... I thought that a writer who embarked, after that, on a novel which was a quarter of a million words long and rather weird by English standards was probably committing suicide. I found it very likely that no publisher would wish to touch it. It had the effect of making me very obstinate, and thinking that, if it was not going to be published, it might as well be the book that I wanted. So I wrote it with reference to no possible reader. I just did what I wanted to do.

*AR: How did you come to choose the map of India for the hero's face?*

It was a comic notion which struck me when I was looking at the map. I saw it as a nose hanging into the sea with a drip off the end of it, which was Ceylon. It was another way of making flesh the idea of Saleem's link with the country. But really, the nose, having come out of that, went off in another direction... if a nose can go off in another direction.

*KHP: It seems to me that the book resists the temptation of social satire of the Naipaul-White type. Is it deliberate?*



Well yes! Basically this book grew out of affection and I think that Naipaul's books about India don't. So that's a simple difference.

AR: *I would like to go back to *Grimus* with the questions of time, space and reality.*

I think *Grimus* is quite a clever book. But that's not entirely a compliment. It's too clever for its own good. At the time of *Grimus*, I was very interested in science fiction. And I was taken with the liberty to discuss ideas that science fiction can give you. I suppose that's why *Grimus* plays so much with science fiction conventions. Bits of that survive in *Midnight's Children*. *Grimus* enabled me to use fantasy without worrying about it.

JB: *There are so many gifted children in science fiction, and in *Midnight's Children* too.*

Yes! And in a way that worried me. There's John Wyndham's novel, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, for instance. And it worried me that these children were going to turn into Midwich Cuckoos, that they were going to become demi-gods or monsters. And I really didn't want them to be either.

JB: *You were saying that you were compared to Voltaire. Even in *Midnight's Children* there's something of *Candide*.*

Well I expect there is a bit. But Saleem is not as innocent as *Candide*. *Candide* is a kind of blank slate on whom the world writes. Saleem is also compared to Little Oskar in *The Tin Drum*. And I think he falls somewhere between *Candide* and Oskar. Oskar is much more demonic than Saleem. And I suppose the similarity with *Candide* is that he gets around a lot, too, and gets badly treated. But I don't think he is quite such a naïve person.

GD: *Do you still remain within the Indian community in Britain, as far as your writing is concerned?*

Well, I think, initially yes! It will be some time before I can think of having a non-Indian leading character or major characters. I can't really see myself doing that at the moment.

JPD: *After this book, in which direction will you move?*

In the long term, where I think the writing will go is away from India. The book I am writing now is not about India. But it's about Pakistan, a slightly fantasized version of Pakistan, which is not called anything in the book much, but is recognisably close to Pakistan. I may be wrong but I think that, at the moment, that's about it for me as far as that part of the world is concerned. At some point, the writing is going to perform the same migration that I did. Because otherwise it becomes spurious to spend your life living in the West and writing exotically about far distant lands, maharajahs... I am very interested in writing about the idea of migration and the effect it has on individuals and groups. And somewhere, I think, there's an enormous novel waiting to be written, unfortunately...

## The Next Issue Includes:

Interviews with J.M. Coetzee, Anita Desai, Alice Munro, Robert Drewe discusses *The Savage Crows* (Wilson Harris) on 'The Quest for Form', Sujit Mukherjee on 'Tigers in Fiction', Roderick Lawrence on the use of domestic space during the last two centuries in Australia and England, articles on Frank Sargeson and R.A.K. Mason.

# Rienzi Crusz

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## THE ELEPHANT WHO WOULD BE A POET

High noon. The piranha sun  
cuts to the bone.  
Anula, the heaving elephant,  
froths at the mouth.  
The logging ends.

Without command  
he eases his huge body to the ground,  
rolls over,  
makes new architecture  
from his thick legs,  
four columns vertical  
to the sun.

The confused mahout  
refuses the poem  
in this new equilibrium,  
this crazy theatre of the mind,

this new way  
of looking at the real world ...  
upside down.

## FRESH-CUT FLOWERS

Out there something is laughing  
like a chained maniac,  
something is laughing  
the laugh of the hyena.

Out there something is groaning  
with ribs split apart,  
something is waiting  
for the last mushroom cloud.

Out there something is giggling  
in a red pinafore dress,  
something is loving  
like a frail Mother Theresa.

Out there something is burning  
by its own arson hands,  
something is crawling  
for the last roots of earth.

Out there something is kneeling  
before a color TV set,  
something is praying  
for the kingdom to come.

The crystal vase  
preaches vermilion beauty:

Roses, a baker's dozen, stand  
without their rooted hearts,  
back to back, thigh to thigh,  
face to fragrant face,

cold anesthetic water  
for their feet,  
two aspirins by the housewife's grace  
to lessen their dying pain.

One terminal rose asks the other:  
What is the something out there?

They call it civilization,  
an art fashioned by the same hands  
that have so carefully arranged  
our own symmetrical deaths.

## POETICS

Like an animal  
the word  
hunts the poet,  
paralyzes him (to other choices);  
or, the poet the word?

In either case,  
there is a killing  
and a resurrection,  
like the Digger Wasp  
that paralyzes the spider,  
lays a single egg  
in its belly,  
and waits patiently  
for its waspy poem.

## Decoding Anand's Humanism

One could hardly locate a more tiresome or clichéd critical label within the scope of English Writing in India than Mulk Raj Anand's humanism. In keeping with each critic's compulsions Anand's commitment is either extolled (by Marxist<sup>1</sup> and liberal<sup>2</sup> alike) or debunked.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, given the sociological innocence of current critical orientations, the concept itself has rarely been placed under critical scrutiny. Yet, as with so many other concepts similarly taken for granted, when it is, what emerges is hardly boring, or for that matter, benign.

In many ways Anand stands out from the mainstream. At a time when national sentiment was revivalist; when writers and thinkers were preoccupied with searching an indigenous tradition for myths that would serve the psychic needs of a rising nationalism, and when an unqualified glorification of this tradition was in order, Anand wrote about untouchables, workers and peasants in terms that by no means merely echo these orthodoxies-in-the-formation. We find there none of the more familiar urgencies of a culture emerging from colonialism. No escape into the formal composure of myth, or even into the uncontested glory of a past, produced in lieu, as it were, of an unrepresentable (and therefore for us as colonized) unbearably shoddy, unaesthetic present. There was no significant attempt by Anand to re-assert the *Indian* as against the Western, and little exoticism in the usual sense of the word. In contrast to his contemporaries (Raja Rao and Aurobindo Ghosh, for example) present time and present place is not merely the occasion, but the subject of Anand's writing. And consequently his fiction is marked by an energy and scope we find in few others.

That on the one hand. On the other, however, is an equally strong sense in which the novels remain schematic and limited. Not because (as current criticism would have us believe) it is programmatic or technically inferior, or even simply because it is written in English. But because, I'd like to argue, of a hidden ideology that imposes certain crippling restric-

tions on the scope of its vision. What happens in the Anand oeuvre is elusive, for its effects are subdued. The key, however, lies in an appreciation of the terminology and bias of Anand's humanism.

Citing sources in Bhakti Yoga<sup>3</sup> or in an innate aesthetic spiritualism<sup>4</sup> may indeed be more fashionable today. But to me it is quite evident that Anand's humanism has its roots in some of the more progressive aspects of the colonial presence in India. He inherits a liberal concern for those rejected and denigrated by society and deprived of what was considered a human life. In many ways his own anti-imperialist stand arises from a consistent application of these values to the Indian question — which is more than one can claim of the British liberals of the time.<sup>5</sup> One might cite Ashoka, Buddha, Mahavira or Guru Nanak as the spokesman of a desi humanism, as immaculate as any European conception, but (even Vivekananda would finally agree) the ideas that informed social criticism and reform, and gave driving force to the process of modernisation itself, were Western.

However, Anand's sympathy for the downtrodden, as well as his broader commitment to the individual's freedom to live humanly<sup>6</sup> is always limited, its scope stunted, because — and this is the argument in this paper — the categories of his humanism remain, not just liberal and in keeping with the commitments of his time, but those of a liberalism transmuted by the biases of British racism. The novels do not perpetuate a racist world view in any obvious way. Never, for instance, are the Whites portrayed as superior — Indians inferior. What happens, rather, is that the tenets of British racism, the criteria it used for judgement, its value-systems and inevitably, therefore, its distorting effects are re-affirmed by the narrative. The world that comes into focus in the novels, therefore, is never one that is consistently imaged and questioned from the new perspective the novel searches and tries to capture, namely that of untouchable, worker or peasant. Rather, we are given, in the guise of that point of view, an ideological formation whose roots lie as much in the racist commitment that dogged that humanism as in liberalism itself. Unwittingly the novel slips back into the colonial diagnosis of the Indian question and its prescription for 'progress' and 'change'.

Much has been made, for instance, of Anand's ability to identify with his characters and recreate the sensory quality of their worlds.<sup>7</sup> When Bakha enters a street, critics point out, we not only *see* as he does, in terms of how much work there is, but smell it as a hungry man would. Similarly, they argue, when Munoo first goes to town, we see the crowds and the shops with a child's excitement, from his particular revealing angle. There is unquestionably a sense in which this is so. Anand does

provide us with elaborately delineated versions of these worlds; sensory detail meticulously recorded; sight, sound, smell and touch recreated. But the over-all effect remains empirical, enumerative, more technically perfect than convincing, for rarely does sound or sight cohere into a convincing experiential whole. Take Munoo's first journey through the town, for instance. He lags behind, 'absorbed by ... the most spicy smells ... tiers of sweets, dripping syrup ... rubber balloons and little pink dolls.... A stall keeper ... emptying little conic tins onto leaf cups ... the weird tin wail of a song which issued from a box on which a black disc revolved'.<sup>9</sup> The technique is evident — a kind of de-familiarization of the object (no kuljis or gramophones here) that would even seem to prefigure Robbe-Grillet's insistent objectivity.<sup>10</sup> The experience, one soon realizes, is not Munoo's, for nothing specific to his actual life impinges on the description. It is rather that of some idealized generic 'child'. What is not so immediately evident is the other rhetoric embedded in this one: the excitement and revulsion of the European in an Indian bazaar. *Spicy* smells, *tiered sweets dripping* syrup, *leaf* cups, *weird* tin wails — and the ultimate in Indian imitative tastelessness, little pink dolls; all compose a specific idea of the bazaar.

It is not difficult to show that this is nearly always the horizon within which Anand's narrative voice achieves consistency. However, there are further dimensions to this hidden ballast. Dimensions I'd like to explore through a longer extract, this time from *Untouchable*:

And he slowly slipped into a song. The steady heave of his body from one latrine to another made the whispered refrain a fairly audible note. And he went forward, with eager step, from job to job, a marvel of movement, dancing through his work. Only, the sway of his body was so violent that once the folds of his turban came undone, and the buttons of his overcoat slipped from their worn-out holes. But this did not hinder his work. He clumsily gathered together his loose garments and proceeded with his business.

Men came one after another, towards the latrines. Most of them were Hindus, naked, except for the loin-cloth, brass jugs in hand and with the sacred thread twisted round their left ears. Occasionally came a Muhammadan, who wore a long, white cotton tunic and baggy trousers, holding a big copper kettle in his hand.

Bakha broke the tempo of his measured activity to wipe the sweat off his brow with his sleeve. Its woollen texture felt nice and sharp against his skin, but left an irritating warmth behind. It was a pleasant irritation, however, and he went ahead with renewed vigour that discomfort sometimes gives to the body.... For, although he didn't know it, to him work was a sort of immolation which gave him a glowing health and plenty of easy sleep. So he worked on continuously, incessantly, without stopping for breath, even though the violent exertion of his limbs was making him gasp.... He could see the half-naked brown bodies of the Hindus hurrying to the latrines. Some of those who had already visited the latrines could be seen scrubbing



their little brass jugs with clay on the side of the brook. Others were bathing to the tune of 'Ram re Ram', 'Hari Ram'; crouching by the water, rubbing their hands with a little soft earth; washing their feet, their faces; chewing little twigs bitten into the shape of brushes; rinsing their mouths, gargling and spitting noisily into the stream; douching their noses and blowing them furiously, ostentatiously.<sup>11</sup>

We have here a description of Bakha at work. But the detail remains circumstantial, incident, unabsorbed by the lived sense of the experience. His turban and buttons come undone, but we do not share the inconvenience or discomfort. Or take the carefully focussed tactile observation: the irritation of rough wool against skin. This too remains decorative. In fact the effect is of a narrator so close to the object that the perceptual distance is not objective, as Anand might have liked to imagine, but mechanical rather than human; the detail excessive and larger than life. Consequently it requires of us no empathy, for we perceive this other as *sight*, from the exterior. Rarely do we enter his experience. As we set this against the sentimentalization of labour evidenced in 'the marvel of movement', 'dancing through his work' or again 'work was an intoxication which gave him glowing health and plenty of sleep', the ideological complex is more clearly delineated.

One only grasps the real thrust of the discourse as a *whole*, however, as one studies the description of the 'Hindus, naked, except for the loin-cloth, brass jugs in hand...', or 'a Mohammadan, who wore a long white cotton tunic and baggy trousers...' The same note is repeated towards the end of the extract which gives us the early morning scene in some detail. *Whose eye, whose consciousness is this?* Anand tells us it is Bakha's but it is really the eye of a stranger to the place, or more accurately, the eye of one, who, aware of the stranger he is showing around, chooses to focus on and explain that which the stranger finds alien or unfamiliar. One is aware of the stranger's curiosity, and even disapproval: the sacred thread, the brass jug, the twigs bitten into the shape of brushes, the *noisy spitting*, the ostentatious nose douching. For the result is a landscape coded in response, not to the way in which it is lived by those who belong there and work there, but in terms of a specifically constructed alien consciousness that questions it. One might compare this with the description of the bazaar Bakha walks through later in the story. Once again, a great deal of detail; deliberate attention to colour, then smell; but if we ask, for whom is this description meant, whose nose, whose eye searches this landscape, the answer is disturbing.

The implications, I believe, emerge more clearly, more subtly, in the first paragraphs of the novel:

The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes. The absence of the drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive stink. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it made it an 'uncongenial' place to live in.<sup>13</sup>

The key lies, once again, in characterizing the narrative voice. It is altogether too distant, too clinical in its recording of item and detail, indeed too squeamish, to be that of someone who has lived in one part of the village, the poor quarter, for all his life. Yet we are explicitly told later that this is 'altogether' what 'Bakha thought'. Critics have commented on this slipping effect before and have even attributed the 'failure' of his novels to this confusion.<sup>14</sup> But having arrived at an evaluative formula (the legitimate end of the New Critical venture) they stop short and fail to probe its crucially important significance.<sup>14</sup>

Echoing the mode of the sociological treatise, the first sentence situates the outcaste's colony in relation, not only to the other parts of the village, but also to the rest of the world. The 'objective' social scientific perspective, still meticulous in its sensory realism, is reinforced by the technical diction: 'mud-walled', 'clustered in two rows', 'boundaries', 'carcasses', 'drainage system', 'prohibition' and so on. The only hint in the first sentence, of a subjective vision is held in the emotive overtones of the metaphor 'shadow', a use one almost discounts as accidental, for its resonances are hardly picked up or developed. The dominant tone remains consistent in the subsequent list of functionaries housed in the area. These, we are told, are the 'outcastes from Hindu society'. This may at first glance seem an innocent piece of information, but what is specified here is the reader implied in the discourse of the text. It is a discourse, we realize, that is not really that of the sociologist, who on the whole studies his or her own society in its complex, advanced form, but that of the *anthropologist* studying an alien, even primitive, society. As the novel develops we will find this is a society whose irrational customs have to be pointed out and explained, and where the behaviour of people is never immediately understood. The 'Hindu Sepoy', we are told, gives Bakha a pair of boots, not, as one might (erroneously) expect if one were

wise or Christian, out of charity or kindness, but out of self-interest: for the good of his own soul (p.11). Chota oils 'his hair *profusely*'. The 'neutral' scientific observer, whose tone and attitude is mimed in the narrative voice, we find, owes allegiance not only to an academic discipline but to the knowledge or experience structure of the reader he is addressing. Here the reader is really, as you can see, foreign, more specifically, British, or, if Indian, an Indian who is coerced into seeing the society he lives in as strange in the same way as white society does. Furthermore this perspective is casually projected through tone, as 'objective' or 'scientific', in other words, a norm that needs no questioning. What of the description of the place: 'dirt ... filth ... odour ... dung ... ugliness ... squalor ... misery', all summed up in 'uncongenial'? Anand himself, I would suggest, is aware that the viewpoint here is necessarily that of someone who has grown away from the village and out of his old consciousness. Bakha, he explains finds it 'uncongenial' only because the 'Tommyes have treated him as a human being and...' The dynamic of the text here is complex.

Our interpretation is more systematically reinforced in the episode concerned with Bakha at the temple (pp.65-6). In the first section, Anand attempts to create a sense of what breaking the taboo and entering the temple might have meant to an untouchable. The point of view here, if you like, would seem to be determinedly Bakha's. Yet note how 'objectively' the description is done. We are given the event in terms of physiological detail, almost as though Bakha was a large mechanical doll. Take, for example, 'captured five steps of the fifteen', 'heart drumming fiercely in his chest, which bent forward like that of an athletic runner on the starting line, his head thrown back', or even 'force of an impulse', 'almost thrown out of equilibrium', 'accidental knock', 'recovering his balance'. Bakha is objectified, and the description drained of its subjective, emotional dimension, a dimension Anand maintains, for instance, in the lines, 'the temple stood challengingly before him' and in 'a glimpse, just a glimpse of the sanctuary which had so far been a secret hidden mystery to him'.

The description of a ceremony in the sanctum of the temple shifts the nature of the discourse slightly. Overtly it would seem that we are given the event through Bakha's consciousness, but what emerges is really a version of the ceremony that renders it a composite, formed out of three slightly variant codes. It is the exotic event of the popular white imagination, an anthropological description and, at the same time, a lesson in the aesthetic appreciation of the Orient! Consider the exotica in 'gold embroidered silk', 'brass images', 'priest sat half naked', 'tuft of hair ...

inscrutable knot'. And note the anthropologist's voice: 'paraphernalia of brass utensils ... other ritualistic objects', shifting towards searching equivalent terms in the reader's experience: 'morning service', 'loud soprano', 'unknown god' and so on. Much of the rest of the passage is in an equally distorting consider-the-beauty-of-oriental-form tone. One hears it in 'dark haired and supple', 'sacred thread throwing into relief the elegant curves of his graceful body', 'hard voice jarring on the bell which tinkled into unison with the brass notes of the conch' and so on. What we get here is not Bakha's vision, or even the vision of one who lives in the place, but that of someone visiting a strange country. And here, more specifically because of the particular detail that composes this world — it would have been slightly different (no inscrutability!) if it had been the African or, say, Amerindian scene — it is the view of the white man in the Orient.

I do not want to make more of this aspect of the novel. I'd like, however, to point out that almost as a direct consequence of the empirical or positivistic 'technical' attitude, embedded in the style, and the world-view such an attitude is correlate with, the solution that seems most appealing to Bakha (and to us) in the end is neither the nationalism of Gandhi or the Communism of Iqbal Nath. Progress, the novel seems to conclude, will come through the advanced technology of the 'water closet'. One cannot forget that this would also be at root the liberal solution to the problem.

To move on to a consideration of the characters in *Untouchable*. One can easily demonstrate that these too are drawn in keeping with the tenets of an imperialist world-view. Let's start with Bakha. He is, we are told right at the beginning, a cut above the other outcastes who are, as a rule, 'content with their lot' (p.9). He is 'a bit superior to his job'. He 'looked intelligent, even sensitive, with a sort of dignity that does not belong to an ordinary scavenger, who's as a rule uncouth and unclean. 'It was perhaps,' Anand continues, 'his absorption in his task that gave him the look of distinction, or his exotic dress, however loose and ill-fitting, that lifted him above his odorous world' (p.17). Bakha is also distinguished from the other 'common' sweepers, even from his brother Rakha, because he is a good sportsman and a hard worker, and is, unlike his sly, lazy, selfish, fox-like father, for instance, a tiger, direct, generous and principled, hard-working and endowed with a real sense of duty. He likes the open country, the land the British loved, as much as they hated its people. In many ways, Bakha is a 'Public School' boy. What I'm trying to put across is that Bakha establishes his real humanity against the vaguely sub-human general run of Indians, not only because he is not like them,

but because he is more like a real (white) human being. (Naturally he admires the Tommies, who emerge in this novel, though not in all of Anand's works, as benign and well meaning.) This is one side of Bakha. There is however another aspect to him that falls more in line with the British patronization of the tribals and lower classes. These people were regarded, like the land, as good in a primitive elemental sort of way. They were childlike, innocent, instinctive, uncorrupted by the evil religion and culture of the upper classes, from whom the British had more to fear, and who were consequently (?) regarded as wily, degenerate and lazy. Consider this much quoted passage:

He worked away earnestly, quickly, without loss of effort. Brisk, yet steady, his capacity for active application to the task he had in hand seemed to flow like constant water from a natural spring. Each muscle of his body, hard as a rock when it came into play, seemed to shine forth like glass. He must have had immense pent-up resources lying deep in his body, for he rushed along with considerable skill and alacrity from one doorless lair to another, cleaning, brushing, pouring phenol. (p.16 – my emphasis)

Bakha is repeatedly described as behaving 'instinctively', as having a fine physique like that of a thorough-bred animal. He is referred to as a tiger, a lion, a bear, a horse. Consider 'his broad, frank face ordinarily so human, so variable, so changing, with its glistening high cheek bones, its broad nose, the nostrils of which dilated like those of an Arab horse' (p.59). One of the more amusing of these images comes up when Bakha's sister Sohini is molested by the priest. Bakha is furious and responds in the true spirit of patriarchal society, where the attack on the woman is regarded not so much as violence to her person as an affront to the family's good name. All Bakha's 'instinctive' manliness is aroused when Sohini is attacked. He has a 'wild desire to retaliate'. And he becomes 'a superb specimen of humanity ... his fine form rising like a tiger at bay'. This, Anand tells us, is the 'highest moment of his strength' (p.71).

The positive terms in which the character of Bakha is composed closely matches the (imperialist) stereo-type of the 'good', 'manly' and 'human'. The value set of a racist world-view, however, is equally clearly reflected in the negative image in which a host of minor characters are represented. Rakha, a 'short, long faced, black, stumpy little man' (p.59) is also lazy, dirty, diseased, irresponsible and selfish. There is a detailed description of him on pp.92-3. Bakha's father is irritable, bullying, childish, diseased, lazy, sly, a 'fox' (p.35). The priest is greedy, dissolute, lecherous. He is 'stricken with a congenital weakness' of both body and mind and 'brazened by authority' (p.51). Bakha's friends, Anand writes,

'bat or stood in the sun, showing their dark hands and feet, they had a curiously lackadaisical, lazy, lousy look about them.... The taint of the little prison cells of their one-roomed homes lurked in them, even in the outdoor air' (p.38). Gulabi is quarrelsome, selfish, irrational, unreliable, jealous, greedy. In this book, as well as in the others (*Coolie* is as good an example as any), the women are more 'Indian' and therefore cruder, more uncivilized, evil and despicable than the men! Significantly this categorization spreads to white women as well: for example, the Salvation Army Colonel's wife in *Untouchable* or Mrs Mainwaring in *Coolie*.

What of Bakha's mother, his sister Sohini, and the good Havildhar Charat Singh who gives Bakha the hockey stick? One at a time. Mothers, especially dead mothers, who have served their husbands and sons faithfully, are owed some respect. But one must also admit that Anand's personal involvement with the mother figure, who in his work is always deified, actually breaks across the consistency of the more mechanical world-view. Sohini, lazy though she is, 'redeems' herself in the classical way open to women: through her beauty. Anand describes her in a way that turns her into a toy figure, and in so doing arrives at a diction totally reduced to the most unselfconscious cliché. She is the Indian goddess, the sculpted Khajhura figure (as against Bakha who is a natural god). Inevitably she is also seen as the temptress, the alluring oriental beauty guilty of the fall of so many (white) men. We come to the Havildhar, who is Indian all right, but one must not forget, is a passionate hockey player.

A similar stricture, I believe, marks much of our writing, in English or otherwise. For the reader the experience is just as distorting. By reincarnating an ideology designed to suppress and destroy us, and by manipulating us in such a way that we accept its designs uncritically. A colonial light still walks the air.

## NOTES

1. See Dieter Riemenschneider, *An Ideal of Man in Anand's Novels* (Bombay: Kutub-Popular, 1967).
2. Both Krishna Nandan Sinha's *Mulk Raj Anand* (New York: Twayne, 1972) and K. S. Sharma's 'Introduction' in *Perspectives on Mulk Raj Anand* (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan) consider Anand essentially as a liberal humanist.
3. M.K. Naik, *Mulk Raj Anand* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1975) points to the 'aesthetic failures' Anand's novels sometimes are. Pointing to a similarly grounded paradox, C.D. Narasimhaiah accuses Anand of 'perpetuating the fatalism of the

past against which he has clearly set himself in novel after novel' (*The Swan and the Eagle* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1969), p.128).

4. As in Margaret Berry, *Mulk Raj Anand: The Man and the Novelist* (Amsterdam: Oriental Press, 1971).
5. Alastair Niven actually suggests Anand's humanism results from a combination of religious ideas he derived from his mother and a sensibility so aesthetically refined it was affronted by squalor and pain (*The Yoke of Pity*, Delhi: Heinemann, 1978).
6. Saroo Gowdasjee documents this in detail. Of Anand's British friends only Orwell stood by him consistently. Even Leonard Woolf, that celebrated friend of India, found Anand's nationalist enthusiasms excessive, and 'extreme Congress' (*So Many Freedoms* (Delhi: OUP, 1977)).
7. One could posit a development in the Anand oeuvre, from the early 'committed', social novels: *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, etc. to the more personal, psychologically centred ones like *Private Life of an Indian Prince*. Predictably, given the New Critical bias of the academy, these latter are often regarded as more 'successful'.
8. See Gowdasjee, Sinha and Naik, for instance.
9. Mulk Raj Anand, *Coolie* (Bombay: Kutub-Popular, undated. Originally published 1932), p.11.
10. Jürgen Habermas in his much acclaimed *Knowledge and Human Interest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968) similarly regards much of early Marxist thought as positivist in its bias and therefore not radical. It is possible that Anand's early involvement with British Empiricism (the topic for his Ph.D. thesis) may have had a greater influence on his world view than is generally acknowledged.
11. Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (Delhi: Orient PB, 1970), pp.18-19. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
12. Naik (above) and Meenakshi Mukherjee in *The Considerations* (Bombay: Allint, 1977), for instance.
13. Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), speaks of the pleasure of reading *Sade*, for instance, as arising from the antipathetic codes that come into contact and the consequent redistribution of language that takes place. Much of the pleasure of writing this piece has, for me, been of a similar order. But it is Barthes I must finally acknowledge.

# Grace Nichols

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We the women who toil  
unadorn  
heads tie with cheap  
cotton

We the women who cut  
fetch clear dig sing

We the women making  
something from this  
ache-and-pain-a-me  
hack-O-hardness

Yet we the women  
who praises go unsung  
who voices go unheard  
who deaths they sweep  
aside  
as easy as dead leaves

Maybe the thing is to forget  
to forget and be blind  
on this little sugar island

To forget the Kingdom of Ancestors  
the washing of throats with palm wine

To not see that woman — female  
flesh feast coated in molasses  
laid out for cop-cop ants to eat



Maybe the thing is to forget — to forget  
and be blind on this little sugar island

Night is her robe  
Moon is her element

Quivering and alert  
she's stepping out behind  
the fields of sugarcane

She's stepping out softly  
she's stepping out carefully  
she's bending she's stalking  
she's flitting she's crawling

Quivering and alert  
she's coming to the edge  
of her island forest

Now, with all the care  
of a herbalist  
she's gathering strange weeds  
wild root  
leaves with the properties  
both to harm and to heal

Quivering and alert  
Quivering and alert  
she's leaving the edge  
of her island forest

From an unpublished collection, 'I is a long-remembered Woman', dealing with the spiritual and revolutionary journey of a slave woman who rises above the harsh reality of her situation.

## Reflections of Obeah in Jean Rhys' Fiction

It was only during the last years of Jean Rhys' life that she became recognized as a West Indian writer. Kenneth Ramchand was one of the first West Indian critics to identify her fiction, along with that of Geoffrey Drayton and Phyllis Shand Allfrey, as belonging to the work of the white West Indian minority. In 1978, the year before Rhys' death, Louis James published a critical study of all her fiction in which he asserted:

Born in her books written wholly about Europe, the sensibility is not wholly European. Her sensitivity to heat and to cold, to bright colour or the absence of colour, her sense of another life behind the mask of society conventions, were formed in the Antilles.<sup>1</sup>

And Thomas F. Staley expressed a similar judgment a year later:

Leaving aside the problematic relationship between life and art, it became clear to me from the first reading of her work that her background and culture not only set Rhys apart from her contemporary novelists, but also shaped a widely different sensibility and radical consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

True, Ford Madox Ford had sensed some special connection between Jean Rhys' birthplace and the subject matter of her first collected short stories when he stated in his long, diffuse Preface to *The Left Bank* (1927):

And coming from the Antilles, with a ... terrific ... passion for stating the case of the underdog, she has let her pen loose on the Left Banks of the Old World ...<sup>3</sup>

But Ford failed to take his observation beyond the simple suggestion that there was some connection between 'coming from the Antilles' and 'stating the case of the underdog'.

One other commentator, Alec Waugh, noted (in 1949) that 'Dominica has coloured her temperament and outlook. It was a clue to her, just as she was a clue to it'.<sup>4</sup> However, neither Ford nor Waugh explored the

literary effects of Jean Rhys' West Indian-ness, and now some attempt should be made to go beyond the identification of Rhys as a West Indian writer to an effort at understanding *how* Rhys' fiction reflects the special qualities of her cultural background. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how a specific cultural aspect of Rhys' Dominican childhood affected her imagination and her literature. The specific cultural feature to which I refer is the Dominican practice of Obeah.

The version of Obeah practiced on Rhys' home island of Dominica has been described by Rhys herself as a milder version of Voodoo such as is practiced on Haiti, like Dominica a formerly French island where a French patois is spoken. In Rhys' unfinished autobiography, *Smile Please*, she says about Obeah, '...even in my time nobody was supposed to take it very seriously' but she confirms the existence of Obeah with an example of a practitioner in her own family household: 'I was told about her [Ann Tewitt, the obeah woman] in a respectful, almost awed tone.'<sup>4</sup> In fact, Obeah was taken seriously on Dominica at the turn of the century and it was taken seriously by the child Gwen Williams (Jean Rhys). Obeah was a pervasive feature of Dominican life during Rhys' childhood and adolescence; her immediate household included a respected practitioner of Obi ritual; and, there were other additional vestiges of Obi observance closely surrounding her — all of which influenced her thinking during her formative years.

I cannot claim to be the first Rhys critic to point to the importance of Obeah in her writing. In his critical study on Jean Rhys, Louis James states that 'her imaginative awareness of *obeah* was to enable her to create the most hallucinatory scenes of *Wide Sargasso Sea*'. James in turn cites Thomas Atwood's *The History of the Island of Dominica* to indicate how deeply the Dominicans were committed to what Atwood called 'witchcraft and idolatry' at the time of Atwood's visit in the late seventeen hundreds. Thus, witchcraft and Obeah were documented on Dominica at least a hundred years before Rhys' birth, and they undoubtedly extend back to the arrival of African slaves in Dominica which Dominican historian Lennox Honychurch dates to the mid-eighteenth century. It is Rhys' awareness of and imaginative participation in this heritage of what Atwood calls 'witchcraft' that I shall detail today.

Before doing so, however, I wish to make one last obeisance to a critic and writer of West Indian literature who perhaps best understands Rhys' imaginative participation in Dominican Obeah. Wilson Harris' sensitivity to Rhys' art is demonstrated in his *Kunapipi* article on Rhys, 'Carnival of Psyche'. Harris points out Rhys' dual ancestry (Welsh and Creole), and identifies her imaginative insights as both 'white' and

'black', a combination Harris exemplifies by Christianity and Obeah. Harris states that 'Obeah is a pejorative term' and continues to say that 'it reflects significantly a state of mind or embarrassment in both black and white West Indians, a conviction of necessary magic, necessary hell-fire or purgatory through which to re-enter 'lost' origins, 'lost' heavens, 'lost' divinity'.<sup>4</sup>

Harris' statement that 'Obeah is a pejorative term' is problematic because he does not clarify for whom he believes it exists in a pejorative sense: himself, Londoners, expatriate British in the West Indies, North Americans, West Indians. All such possible candidates aside, Jean Rhys did not consider Obeah as a pejorative term or even as a word conveying a negative value. In fact, she so internalized the cultural values of Dominican Obeah that she eventually came to view herself as the white witch, the West Indian Obeah woman among the alien inhabitants of England.

The initial literary manifestation of Rhys' psychic involvement with the phenomenon of witchcraft appears in her first published material, the collected short stories of *The Left Bank*. Rhys had been away from Dominica for twenty years when the stories were written. However, despite two decades of absence from the West Indies, the memory of Rhys' Dominican homeland remained strong, working its way in various manners into the collection. *The Left Bank* admirably exemplifies what Harris calls the combination of black and white tones, containing as it does pieces such as 'Trio', 'Mixing Cocktails', and 'Again the Antilles' which are distinct West Indian counterparts to the Montparnassian pieces. The Montparnassian pieces themselves contain frequent repudiations of Anglo-Saxon behaviour and attitudes while there are also some strange extrusions of heterodox material which do not seem to fit into the mainly anecdotal matter set in a European context. For example, heterodoxy is illustrated in the piece entitled 'In the Rue de L'arrivée' wherein Dorothy Dufreyme, pointedly cited as an Anglo-Saxon lady, dreams of dying and being conducted willingly to hell. Her concern, expressed in the final line of the story, is that hell might turn out to be heaven. This unusual point-of-view for an Anglo-Saxon lady bears out Harris' observation that Obeah 'reflects ... a state of mind ... in both black and white West Indians ... [of] a conviction of ... necessary hell-fire or purgatory through which to re-enter 'lost' origins'. That the actuality of Obeah had not faded from Rhys' consciousness even after twenty years away from Dominica is demonstrated in 'Mixing Cocktails', where she evokes a figure who turns up again and again in her writing, that of 'our cook, the old Obeah woman', here named 'Ann Twist'.

In 'Mixing Cocktails' the Rhysian character receives her first lessons from the Obeah woman. She 'mustn't look too much at de moon'. The narrative voice explains, 'If you fall asleep in the moonlight you are bewitched.' The little Creole girl who is prone to falling asleep in the verandah hammock is thus warned against the danger of moon madness. As a child, then, the Rhysian heroine connects Obeah, witchery, and madness — a congeries that peaks in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. 'Ann Twist's' white counterpart emerges in the last piece of the collection, the lengthy approximation of Rhys' flight through continental Europe. In 'Vienne' the heroine Francine and her husband escape arrest in Vienna by fleeing to Budapest and from Budapest to Prague.

It was an odd place, that hotel, full of stone passages and things. I lay vaguely wondering why Prague reminded me of witches.... I read a book when I was a kid — *The Witch of Prague*. No. It reminded me of witches anyhow. Something dark, secret and grim.<sup>7</sup>

The story 'Vienne' and the collection *The Left Bank* end in Prague, leaving Francine to adopt the style of the city that reminds her of witches: 'I noticed at lunch that the grand chic at Prague seemed to be to wear dead black. I groped in the trunk for something similar, powdered carefully, rouged my mouth, painted a beauty spot under my left eye.' Making up her face as if for carnival, Francine assumes the dark dress of the city of witches. At this point in Rhys' fiction, the black and white tones are still separate: Ann Twist, the black Obeah woman, and Francine, the white witch of Prague.

The Obeah woman Ann Twist becomes Anne Chewett in Rhys' self-declared favourite novel, *Voyage in the Dark*. The eighteen-year-old heroine sinks into reverie tinged with delirium shortly before the abortion with which the novel concludes. The heroine, Anne Morgan,<sup>8</sup> recalls the extraordinary mountainscape of her home island, conjuring up its image by mentally listing the mountains' patois names. Morne Diablotin, by free association, releases the memory of Anne Chewett who 'used to say it's haunted and obeah'. Anne Chewett's authority for identifying a spot consecrated to Obeah is attested by the fact that she has been jailed for practicing Obeah. These repeated literary references to the Williams family's resident Obeah woman may seem to indicate little more than the indelibility with which Ann Tewitt's presence was etched on Jean Rhys' childhood. However, *Voyage in the Dark* includes that important new piece of information which helps provide insight into Rhys' evaluation of the Obeah woman's social position: Anne Chewett has spent time in jail for practicing Obeah. This information reflects Wilson Harris' obser-

vation that Obeah carries a pejorative value, and, more central to Rhys' canon, it reflects the demonstrated social fact that women who practice either African or European witchcraft are routinely punished by the dominant society to which they belong as non-typical members.

The almost casually offered information that Anne Chewett had been incarcerated for Obeah practice takes on a new dimension in the uncollected short story 'I Spy A Stranger'. Here there is no reference to the West Indies or to Obeah practice. But there is a reappearance of the Witch of Prague motif. Such a reappearance is not entirely surprising, even though 'I Spy A Stranger' was published in 1966, thirty-nine years after 'Vienne'. As the Obeah woman motif is inapplicable to a thoroughly English protagonist in a totally British setting, it is simply replaced by the more appropriate allusion to a European conjure woman: the Witch of Prague.

Jean Rhys told Marcelle Bernstein in a 1969 *Observer* interview that the villagers of Cheritan Fitzpaine had accused her of being a witch after she had settled there. One of her neighbours 'told the whole village I practiced black magic'.<sup>7</sup> This sort of hostility, which Rhys encountered in England even after decades of British residency, informs 'I Spy A Stranger'. The 'I' of the title is the collective village mentality and the 'Stranger' is Laura, the middle-aged heroine who visits a female cousin in England during the second world war. Mutual antagonism is displayed in 'I Spy A Stranger' and it is the 'stranger' who is eventually punished. Laura's punishment is similar to that of Anne Chewett, the West Indian woman jailed for practicing Obeah. After an unsuccessful attempt to bring civil charges against Laura for violating blackout regulations, the villagers, headed by Ricky, adopt the time-honoured mode of removing an objectionable woman from society: incarceration for madness. The sanatorium to which Laura is shanghaied equates the attic to which Antoinette Rochester is incarcerated as a madwoman in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: 'There was a photograph on the cover of a prospectus showing a large, ugly house with small windows, those on the two top floors barred. The grounds were as forbidding as the house and surrounded by a high wall.'<sup>8</sup> Laura, early in her visit dubbed as the Witch of Prague, is jailed as a madwoman because the disposal of witches by burning lacks social approval in World War II England. It is reserved for Antoinette, the white witch of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, to suffer both incarceration, the established punishment for Obeah practice, and burning, the traditional punishment for witchcraft.

What Wilson Harris calls Rhys' 'mythic' treatment of West Indian Obeah enabled Rhys to transcend the social barriers imposed by her skin

colour. Anna Morgan exclaims: 'I wanted to be black, I always wanted to be black,' and Jean Rhys attests in her autobiography that she prayed ardently as a child to be black. The frustration of belonging to a minority race is illustrated in Anna Morgan's description of her social relationship with her childhood companion Francine:

The thing about Francine was that when I was with her I was happy. She was small and plump and blacker than most of the people out there, and she had a pretty face.... But I knew that of course she disliked me ... because I was white, and that I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white.<sup>11</sup>

What racial barriers prevented Rhys from achieving in actual life, literature enabled her to accomplish through art: an erasure of racial barriers with a resultant free flow between black and white identities. The first indication of this free flow is Rhys' naming of her white witch of Prague (in 'Vienne') after her black childhood friend Francine.

In her autobiography, Rhys verifies Francine's real life role described in *Voyage in the Dark*,

I made great friends with a negro girl called Francine.... Francine's stories were ... full of jokes and laughter, descriptions of beautiful dresses and good things to eat. But the start was always a ceremony. Francine would say, 'Tim-tim.' I had to answer 'Bois stche,' then she'd say, 'Tablier Madame en derrière des'.... She always insisted on this ceremony before starting a story and it wasn't until much later, when I was reading a book about obeah, that I discovered that 'Bois stche' is one of the gods. I grew very fond of Francine and admired her; when she disappeared without a word to me I was hurt. People did disappear, they went to one of the other islands, but not without saying goodbye.<sup>12</sup>

Rhys' young friend was in her own way a minor practitioner of Obeah, invoking one of the ceremonial forms and one of the ceremonial figures. She required young Gwen Williams' participation in a fragment of Obeah ritual, and she helped establish the general atmosphere over which Ann Tewitt presided with greater authority. Francine was Gwen Williams' own age and it was easier for the young girl to identify herself with her companion than with the older woman. The extent to which the young white Creole did identify with the young black Creole is displayed in *Wide Sargasso Sea* when the players of the Dominican drama are transformed into the characters of the novel: Antoinette Cosway and Tia, Antoinette's childhood friend.

Tia and Antoinette share many childhood hours, swimming together, cooking and eating treats, sleeping together. And Tia deserts Antoinette. When Antoinette runs to Tia for solace during the firing of Coulibri, Tia

betrays Antoinette by throwing a rock at her. 'As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her.... When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face.' Antoinette's affection for Tia blocks out the treasonous rock. Tia's ambivalence, engendered by racial politics, expresses itself after she throws the stone that wounds Antoinette. 'I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass.'<sup>12</sup> Tia disappears from Antoinette's life in the novel but readers of the novel know that in its final scene Antoinette returns to an apparition of Tia as she flings herself from the parapet of Thornfield Hall. Never forgotten, Tia, like Francine, remains a lifelong influence. And when she disappears from the novel she is replaced by Christophine as the child Antoinette matures into adulthood and needs an adult companion.

While Tia only recites isolated incantations to an Obeah god, Christophine delves more deeply into Obeah practice, consummating as it were, the initiation over which Tia officiated. Christophine is the Obeah woman from Martinique of whom the local folk are afraid. She inspires the same respect and fear that Ann Tewitt inspired in Gwen Williams' childhood home. Of Christophine, young Antoinette recounts:

The girls from the hayside who sometimes helped with the washing and cleaning were terrified of her. That, I soon discovered, was why they came at all — for she never paid them. Yet they brought presents of fruit and vegetables and after dark I often heard low voices from the kitchen. (p.21)

The fealty to an Obeah woman implied in this quotation; the presents brought in possible payment for services rendered 'after dark' are most subtly suggested. A more graphic imaginative construction of Christophine's association with Obeah is created by the child Antoinette who superimposes the paraphernalia of Obeah over the austerity of Christophine's bedroom at Coulibri:

I knew her room so well — the pictures of the Holy Family and the prayer for a happy death. She had a bright, patchwork counterpane, a broken-down press for her clothes, and my mother had given her an old rockingchair.

Yet one day when I was waiting there I was suddenly very much afraid. The door was open to the sunlight, someone was whistling near the stables, but I was afraid. I was certain that hidden in the room ... there was a dead man's dried hand, white chicken feathers, a cock with its throat cut, dying slowly, slowly.... No one had spoken to me about obeah — but I knew what I would find if I dared to look. (pp 31-2)



The question of whether or not Christophine actually practices witchcraft is resolved later in the novel when she is importuned by Antoinette to prepare a love potion. She complies, all the while warning Antoinette that her magic does not work well for *békés*.

That Christophine is the literary descendant of Ann Twist, 'our cook, the old Obeah woman' of 'Mixing Cocktails' is illustrated by a story Antoinette tells her new husband Rochester. Awakening during the night and finding herself watched by two rats, the child Antoinette ran onto the verandah to sleep in a hammock.

There was a full moon that night — and I watched it for a long time. There were no clouds chasing it, so it seemed to be standing still and it shone on me. Next morning Christophine was angry. She said it was very bad to sleep in the moonlight when the moon was full. (p.83)

Linked with Obeah and witchcraft, with earlier Obeah women in the Rhys canon, Christophine is threatened with jail when she suggests to Rochester that he return to Antoinette a portion of her dowry. Rochester sends Christophine away and she disappears as Tia disappeared before her.

Christophine's replacement by Antoinette is infinitely more subtle than the earlier replacement of Tia by Christophine, just as the doubling of Tia and the child Antoinette is more explicit than the doubling of Christophine and Antoinette. Both Creole women share an empathy for and understanding of their surroundings that Rochester can never approximate. Their understanding of West Indian experiences crashes, however, against Rochester's English behaviour and values. Christophine's magic potion fails and Antoinette's witchery of beauty and fortune crumble before the severity of Rochester's self-service. Seeking to escape from Rochester with Antoinette, Christophine's power to incite fear and respect in those she encounters fades before his alien point-of-view; similarly, Antoinette's spirit is quenched when Rochester withdraws his love.

After the dismissal of Christophine, Rochester needs only pressure Antoinette into some semblance of madness in order to dispose of her also. Lacking Christophine's sorcery to help her in dealing with Rochester, Antoinette develops the moon madness that enables her to liberate herself from Rochester — something she could not do while sane or through Christophine's intervention. Tall, dark, and fierce, mad Antoinette now incites in those around her the terror which Christophine once commanded. She escapes her jailer and sets fire to her jail. She then unites herself with Tia whom she sees call to her from beneath the

parapet of Thornfield Hall. At last Antoinette is able to emulate Tia whom sharp stones did not hurt and for whom fires always lit.

Written in Jean Rhys' seventies, after fifty years away from her Dominican home, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is Rhys' contribution to the dissolution of social barriers grounded in racial differences. It is a *tour de force* of imaginative art by which she resolved for herself her childhood friendship with Francine, and through which she painted for her readers an extraordinary facet of West Indian experience.

## NOTES

1. Louis James, *Jean Rhys* (London: Longman, 1978), p. 35.
2. Thomas F. Staley, *Jean Rhys* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), p. 1.
3. Ford Madox Ford, Preface, *The Left Bank*, by Jean Rhys (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), p. 24.
4. Alec Waugh, *The Sugar Islands* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1949), pp. 95-6.
5. Jean Rhys, *Smile Please* (London: André Deutsch, 1979), p. 22.
6. Wilson Harris, 'Carnival of Psyche', *Kanapipi*, II, No 2, p. 148.
7. Jean Rhys, *The Left Bank*, p. 252.
8. Anna Morgan, the heroine who bears such an historically significant West Indian surname, shares with Anne Chewett a close variant of the Obeah woman's given name.
9. Marcelle Bernstein, 'The Inscrutable Miss Jean Rhys', *London Observer*, 1 June 1969, p. 42.
10. Jean Rhys, 'I Spy A Stranger', *Art and Literature*, 8 (Spring 1966), p. 52.
11. Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (New York: Popular Library, n.d.), p. 69.
12. Jean Rhys, *Smile Please*, p. 31.
13. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York: Popular Library, 1966), p. 46. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.

# Sam Maynard: Supermarket

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# Mark O'Connor

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## 'THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH'

### 1. *The Crusaders*

Their gravestones edge a mound of soil  
brought from the hill of Calvary. No one records  
what weeds it grew in that first Spring, but bones  
were rotted free of flesh in a single night.  
And their chapel depicts 'The Triumph of Death',  
work of an unknown master-victim. Its theme:  
The World — As Hell Would Hate To Have It Known.

### 2. *The Perished*

Invisible on the left wall  
death with bat wings and world long sickle nips  
the leaning poppy-heads of fine-gowned ladies. Below  
in an Eastern land angels and demons cruise above  
three crosses, picking off their proper prey,  
while a hunter finds royal carnage in a wood.  
The horse protrudes its neck in horror at the pile  
of lords and ladies, jewelled and wigged,  
jumbled like apples in a barrel. Souls  
float up from their mouths as naked babes to where  
the Heavenly Fleet — like a naval battle canvas —  
sort it out with bat-winged lion-clawed demons  
that fight like tow-trucks for disputed cases.  
The priest's soul like a toddler leaps for angel's  
arms, while a devil's claw hooks off a foot:  
and from calm bier and clasped jewelled hands of age  
a Pope's soul goes whistling up to Satan's jaws.  
— No lace or gold can keep the spirit in  
when its true master calls. But here's one



that flips like a paper dart between Hell's  
and Heaven's hands, until a snake's curled teeth  
seize on its ear with glee.

### 3. *The World of Fools*

A lady's hands tease out her lap-dog's lips:  
— the old saint points; her fingers turn  
to her own heart. A monk with fiery eyes  
gives a true-love kiss as he draws  
a masked and hatted woman to his cell, cowl  
tucked like a bib around his chin. A jewelled  
snake with red underparts liches out  
from his swollen belly. Yet Satan weeps  
and good lions stand on guard as the holy hermit  
milks his goat that juts her haunches like a loving girl.

While giant centipedes crawl out of wombs and ears,  
a golden girl, the dream of hopeless boys,  
is hauled away, back arched like a fitch-cat,  
to prove fine women burn as well as other fuel;  
and bound and spitted flies  
with the same grace that damned her worshippers.

Stirring dust, while princes pass,  
the hermit's staff finds out the skull  
of a good man gone to God's eternal now.

### 4. *The Judgement*

Opposite is the ending.  
Cherub flotillas float with oarlike trumps.  
The saints, all newly rescued,  
join the old hands serenely reconciled  
to see the devil get his due. The good King  
draws his wife up from the grave, but an emperor  
caught sneaking in, is trampled down  
in hi sgreen-gold cloak where faceless forms  
scrabble at the hatch of Heaven.

Stout Sergeant Raphael draws a trembling sheep  
out of the Hell-bound dung-soiled flock,  
and Michael's sword says 'It is just'.

### 5. *The Damned*

Beyond,  
dukes and emirs tumble down that pit  
where (since evil hates to think) a mindless  
cow-headed Satan laughs. Among caged sodomites  
a hooked claw rips out guts that fall unwound  
into another sinner's mouth.

The Envious pull the new damned in with glee,  
helping to saw off breasts and knees. Gourmets  
around a table sample their own blood;  
or, bound like pigs, observe sweet food,  
while snakes constrict their throats.

Faith yields to repeated image,  
in a universe of converging proofs. The as-if world  
of art occludes the real, wakes childhood  
terrors, compressing the mix as a diesel  
piston forces the spark from sheer compaction.

The four walls close like coffin lids  
with their unwearying shout that all life veers  
from Heaven to Hell, that every glance not bound  
to Heaven plays to a pack of leering crowing fiends.  
Each thought that doubts this one recruits  
for the devil's torture-racks.

Men have died screaming of it.  
It is a fancy to expel the world.

*\*The Triumph of Death is a gigantic mural painted by an unknown artist on the inner wall of the cemetery chapel beside the Cathedral of Pisa.*

## FROM THE TERRACE

What's to see in Enna? Sicily. The high  
belvedere shows all, from the Syracuse quarries  
where Athens died, to Odysseus's Wandering Stones  
that block the straits for Greece. Families stroll  
by the edge, and blonde Enna spurts  
her melt-rock a kilometre high, over slopes where  
last year's flows still scald.

It's so easy  
to stray from the advised Archaeological areas  
into a desert of roaring Fiats and Hondas  
where urchins soccer tin-cans.  
But let's finish the tour ...

The town has two statues; one to the slave  
who called his brothers free, and soared  
beyond Roman swords to the rocks below.

The other in the public square  
where citizens stroll with their rightful wives  
and young girls with swelling breasts fall in step  
with permitted cousins: the frightful rape  
of Proserpine, the crime that Enna wears  
like fame. From lap and hand the flowers fall.  
The faithful hell-hound leers with all three mouths.  
Her averted face detests; but the off-balance  
thigh hints whitely at the swell of haunch,  
since flesh has no other world to see. How can she beg  
another lover from this god whose breath is rotting meat,  
whose tongue is forking snakes that eat like worms  
into her ear?

But look in vain for that fair field where Pluto's car  
broke through the flowering turf. The grove's a motor  
speedway now, circling a green eutropic lake. 'To link  
the past and present worlds', the brochure says. Avernus  
boasts a bar and riding school.

Hell is not mocked.

His envy stands a moment wrestling beauty  
as the spider holds the bitten bee, till venom takes.

He sees contorted lines blot out  
the face of classic youth, and skullbones rise  
from shrieking cheeks. The nymph's long legs  
besmirched and bloody, soften, quiver  
with delicious blood, while on black stubble  
unrepulsed the haggard mother sobs.

The girl's of course a myth,  
perhaps an aspect of her mother, Earth, Demeter,  
Harvest. The misused hills are her eroded breasts.  
Noise and foul air and warning shouts complete  
the vision of a timeless rape.

## Old Myths and New Delusions: Peter Weir's *Australia*

To the layman's eye *Gallipoli* is technically flawless: superb shots of outback country, a convincing evocation of the period, thoroughly believable Gallipoli cliffs, fine acting (even in the minor roles), and something which is to say the least rare in the Australian film industry, a good script — thanks to David Williamson. Moreover the picture, unlike *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (an otherwise impressive film which was fumbled towards the end), is dramatically *tight*, completely under control from first to last. It is full of splendid touches, like the appearance of the wooden horse early in the piece, to which the audience immediately responds, recognizing the allusion to *Troy*. Then there is the perfect miniature, the scene with the camel driver in the desert. There is the parallelism of two wildernesses, the deserts of the new world and the old, and, even more striking, the link drawn between the lights and gaiety of the departure from Perth (and of the nurses' ball in Egypt) and the Luna Park effects of the arrival at Gallipoli. There is the — nicely timed — moment of sheepish, ineffectual dawning of consciousness, when someone realizes the Diggers have carried out rough justice on the wrong Egyptian shopkeeper. There is the controlled pathos of all those sequences set in the shadow of the pyramids, particularly the one in which Archy and Frank race towards the tombs. Motifs of innocence and of death combine here — and of course the run for the pyramids ironically prefigures the last run at Gallipoli. There is the sensitive, lyrical effect of the swimming sequence on the beach. At this point the camera takes us under the water, distancing us from the fighting. Suspended in a dreamy fluid the naked Diggers seem remote from the reality above, temporarily freed. Then the illusion is broken, one of them is hurt, and we are returned to the real. Finally, there is the satisfyingly balanced shape of the film as a whole, first the treatment of Innocence, then of Experience, beginning with Western Australia and Egypt, ending with Turkey.

And yet there is a sentimentality about *Gallipoli* which is neither local nor incidental but *structural*, built into the bones of the drama. This becomes more and more apparent as we think systematically about what we have seen, resisting the soft lyricism of the camera whose effect is quite simply to seduce. At this point the question arises: what does the film say? (Not: what is it *intended* to say, but: what, in fact, *does* it say?)

The structure of *Gallipoli* is built on an underlying metaphor: that of the race. The film opens with a scene in which Archy races against himself. Shortly after, Archy races against a doubtful character who, at this stage at least, functions as the villain. Then Archy races against Frank. In Egypt there is the race for the pyramids. Finally there are the runs at Gallipoli, Frank's backwards and forwards from HQ to the front, Archy's towards the Turkish lines. In this case Frank races against time to save the day and Archy races into the arms of death. Interestingly, the protagonists race against each other on three occasions. In the first Archy is handicapped (his feet are wounded), in the last he is killed. In the first and second the two are competing, in the last they are not, at any rate on the face of it. Inevitably Archy wins the race. He *always* wins, except in Egypt, when it does not really matter. In order to grasp the implications of this we have to examine the Archy-Frank pair much more closely. Archy is blond, blue-eyed; he comes from the country; he wants to enlist; he is innocent (and young — too young to enlist, in fact). Frank, by comparison, is dark; he comes from the city; does *not* want to enlist; is not innocent but sceptical. (He is also of Irish origin. Why *should* he join the army, the film pertinently asks. The contradiction, once pointed out, is never examined.) What Weir and Williamson *believe* they are doing is crystal clear. They want to balance the portrait of a naïve boy, eager to serve the cause of Empire, with something more critical. But that is scarcely what emerges.

In fact, the mechanism is one convincingly exposed by Roland Barthes. It might be expressed as follows: *give a little, take a lot*. This works in small ways throughout the film, for example in the scene already referred to, that of the Egyptian shopkeeper. The Diggers discover they have been sold a fake antique, and they confront the dealer with this. To provide an illusion of justice and fairmindedness, one of the Diggers is polite; to provide an illusion of realism, one is aggressive. The dealer, though, will not budge. He is not beaten, nor is his shop destroyed. The troops simply break a few items, and the result is a refund. As the Australians leave, we have the twist: one of them realizes it was the wrong dealer. On the face of it this *dénouement* should satisfy everyone. Even honest, well-meaning Australians can make a mistake. Even

Egyptians can be wrongly accused. What could be fairer than this conclusion? The truth, of course, is that Australian troops behaved like brutal barbarians in Egypt. They did not make the odd mistake: they were — what else? — racist and violent. Once an Australian film might have shown them as good blokes teaching a depraved, shifty Egyptian the lesson of his life. But Australians have come a long way since then. In *Gallipoli* the troops *mean* to do the right thing, but they make an *error of judgement*. No one is to blame, it's a *mistake*. We give a little, take a lot, showing Australians as fallible in order to underline their overall virtue, telling a small, harmless truth in order to promote a whopper.

This mechanism of revealing small flaws in order to obscure sizeable ones recurs, but at this stage it suffices to stress that it underpins the sentimentality of the entire film. Naturally we are not supposed to examine any of this critically. The whole point of sentiment is that one should go no further than the surface, that is to say the enjoyment of a confused combination of sadness and exaltation. Unfortunately, sentiment has a *logic*, and, in spite of Weir's attempts to erase his tracks, this logic is there for anyone to analyse.

It is especially evident in the presentation of Archy, that blond, blue-eyed hero. Certainly the film acknowledges his naïveté (one thinks of his exchange with the camel driver, where he argues the need to stop the enemy before they reach — Western Australia!) but only to *endorse* it. Because Archy is a hero, unashamedly, from first to last, though, not, of course, a flawless one. If we follow him into the desert, as Frank does, we are likely to become lost. But Weir's parable does not stop there: Archy is lost, but also providentially rescued and therefore ultimately justified.

One quickly-established characteristic of the hero involves the Aborigines. After a muster Archy and an Aborigine wash at the same trough. And in case we object that this is somewhat idealized, the two tussle and splash, that is, they behave aggressively, but in a context of play. At this stage the audience feels that it is at least plausible, since *some* people in 1915 must have been on familiar terms with Aborigines. Soon after this Archy races barefoot against a white man on horseback who has made a racist remark. He wins (providentially) when his opponent is thrown from his horse, and racism is nicely put in its place. Let us for a moment overlook the patronizing attitude towards the Aborigine revealed in it all. (Moreover Weir slips up badly throughout the scene in having his Aborigine act as eager *servant* to Archy, willing, for example, to prepare his bare feet for the race. And, incidentally, what a piece of nonsense that is, *wallowing* in bad faith! The black man mutters spells while rubbing herbs on Archy's foot. The emotional content is clear: Abor-

igines have 'knowledge' of plants, a quasi-mystical 'wisdom' to be used in the service of virtuous whites. It may be true, but who in white Australian society believes in black wisdom, in an other-than-token, sentimental way? But it is safe to endorse a little magic here, given Weir's larger mystification.) The real problem is not the small fib or even the patronising of Aboriginal people. Much worse is the suggestion that X who fights at Gallipoli is a Friend of Aborigines. Now no one could possibly believe that the spirit which carried the Anzacs to Gallipoli to fight for the cause of Empire is a spirit favourable to the Australian Aborigine. It would be enough to ask Xavier Herbert or, better still, Kevin Gilbert or Kath Walker. Weir is here supporting the worst kind of white self-congratulatory mystique. Let us state the objective truth: the spirit of *Anzac*, that is to say the spirit which took Australians half way round the globe to fight under an imperial flag, *is the same spirit which, in their own country, fed black people flour laced with strychnine.*

This is a hard truth to swallow, but there is no way of avoiding it. Of course it is not to say that most (or even any) of the men who fought in 1915 were motivated by other than confusedly admirable ideals. The same no doubt was true when colonial troops helped to subjugate a free people, the Boers, and in a way so brutal as to be comparable only to the abominations committed in Vietnam, of which Agent Orange is a discreet reminder. The point is not what Australian soldiers *thought* they were doing but what in fact they *did*. It is in *that* light that we must understand the shocking statement italicized above.

Naturally Archy is simply one man and it is quite possible that one man should have been like that in 1915, that is, anxious to enlist and friendly with Aborigines. But that line of argument is, as Americans would say, a copout. *Gallipoli* contains an *objective* message and that message is a cynical (sentimentality usually turns out to be cynical), lazy, comfortable, destructive lie. Today Australians are no longer supposed to be racist. So we give a little, take a lot; we say the spirit of Anzac is favourable to Aborigines, we show Archy and his Aboriginal companion as intimately close — then we forget the racist content of the Anzac myth, the *real* history of Australia before and after 1915. It fools nobody, least of all Aboriginal Australians.

One other point needs to be made in this context. Before crossing the desert, Archy and Frank exchange a few words with a cheerful, confident, not-at-all-abashed Aborigine employed by the railway, and this seems harmless enough until we recognize the stereotype which is being invoked. It is that of Benson in the American TV series, *Soap*. Benson is a negro servant who pushes his masters around. He knows better than



they do, and looks after them with amused, indulgent superiority. Williamson, obviously short of real Australian models, borrows Benson, or someone like him from the U.S. dream factory, for his portrait of an Aborigine in *Celluloid Heroes*. Now that is scandalous enough, but it is not the issue here. The sickening thing about the Benson mystique is its cruel inversion of the truth in the guise of ethnic tolerance. Whites patronize black people; black people have no chance of patronizing whites. To show them doing this, as in *Celluloid Heroes* or *Gallipoli*, even to a minute degree, through misguided goodwill, shamefully distorts reality. It's insufferable for white Australians to think that a pretence of this sort confers dignity on the Aborigine, since dignity comes from the truth, not from make-believe. One wonders how Williamson and Weir can have so little idea of the implications of their own film. In the long run, OMO could not do a better job on the people who distributed funny flour.

To return to the hero. Archy is much more than an unlikely befrienders of Aborigines; he is the archetypal Australian, solid as the Dog on the Tucker Box. The fact is signalled even in such trivial details as his bush hat (Frank generally wears a cap). Because Archy is a country boy, and it is a cherished cliché that the true Australian is a bushman, not a city dweller. Now there may be a lot of truth in that. Certainly if Australians ever acquire a genuine nationalism it will come from their understanding of the land. But *Gallipoli* is not concerned with a genuine nationalism, only with what passes for nationalism in this country.

This is the trouble with Archy. He conforms to the Australian legend. He crosses deserts (becoming lost only ties him more securely to the myth, in this case via Burke and Wills); rides horses as well as the Man from Snowy River; is honest, straightforward, innocent, but at the same time willing to Be in It and Do his Bit without too much soul-searching or premeditation. Above all he is a good mate — hence all those shots of the pair, in Western Australia, Egypt, Turkey. With all of this what *else* could he have on his head except a bush hat?

The difficulty is not that Archy is the type of the Australian. As far as that goes, we could have a worse image. The difficulty is that he wants to enlist, that he does in fact enlist, and that he fights at Gallipoli. In short Weir's film reiterates the spurious myth: that the true Australian is a Gallipoli Digger, that the Digger is the spiritual descendant of the bushman, that Gallipoli must be set at the heart of the quest for nationhood.

Which is simply not true. If Anzac is a source of nationalism it can only be a source of a pseudo-nationalism. To say this is not to belittle the

Anzacs, only to insist on a point of logic. Gallipoli was not fought for an Australian, but for an English cause. The Anzacs were not an Australian, but an imperial force: the A.I.F. They served under English, not Australian (or New Zealand) leaders: Hamilton and Birdwood. Gallipoli itself was (disastrously) conceived by a man who had no loyalty whatever to Australia, as his behaviour in the next war demonstrated: Churchill. Its aim was, among other things, to uphold not those (supposed) democratic principles associated with the Australian stereotype, but Tsarism in Russia. In short, Gallipoli can only be linked to the development of national sentiment in this country by ignoring every rule of common sense. You simply cannot foster nationalism in place A by fostering allegiance to place B. All this has been said, in different words, by Manning Clark in the latest volume of his *History*. Now we are not seeking to enlist volume five of the *History*, with its detailed examination of the phenomenon of the Australian-Briton, on the side of the present argument as a whole. As it happens, volume five (which culminates in the story of Gallipoli) was released at much the same time as Peter Weir's film. Its point is that Gallipoli, far from strengthening the search for a national identity, emasculated it. How could it be otherwise? By definition there could be nothing *patriotic* about Gallipoli, if by patriotism we mean (what else?) allegiance to one's own country. That is Australia — isn't it?

The film is not unaware of the problem, naturally. It introduces subtle references to Empire, the reading of Kipling's *Jungle Book*, for example. It introduces the camel driver's doubts (why is a European war *our* war?), not to mention Frank's or his father's (why fight for the English?). Give a little, take a lot. *Gallipoli* points to the contradiction only to dispose of it. In the end we are left with the overwhelming sense that people like Archy are quintessentially Australian and that people like Archy fight at Gallipoli. The best that Weir can do is to hint that Archy might be mistaken, and that suggestion is forgotten in the pathos and the glory of the finish. It is still the old myth, brought out of the cupboard, dusted and paraded every Anzac Day. Repetition will never resolve its inherent contradiction.

How does the end of Weir's film comment on these problems? We conclude with two runs, one for life, one towards death. It should be noted, by the way, that, in the shorthand of the film, 'running' is equivalent to 'integrity'. Archy's run is the culmination of his entire life. As the bullets enter his chest and blood appears, movement is stopped. That signals a change in the nature of time as far as Archy is concerned. Archy, in fact, is no longer in time but in eternity, frozen in an image, that of death. The film ends with this image, about which more later. We could equally say that in this moment *sub specie aeternitatis* Archy is



*On the cliff-face at Anzac Cove.*



*Archy just before he goes over the 'top'*

no longer an individual, but a myth — *the* myth: an 'Anzac', which is something timeless (*Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn*). The message was implicit in that run to the pyramids. There Archy runs, symbolically, not only towards a tomb, i.e. towards death, but towards a monument to immortality, to life-after-death. Life-after-death is life-in-myth, and Archy's last run ensures that. So Archy's life ends, appropriately, on the top of a high mountain. His last run is his apotheosis. What about Frank's run, though, the one which *loses*?

Now at one level the tragedy hinges on Frank's run. It is in fact a tragedy of the he-didn't-make-it-in-time variety, a familiar enough device of melodrama. Even at this level it is sentimental: as if it *could* all be stopped, prevented, by a run! The film itself, having introduced it, cannot swallow this romanticism — and of course the run has to fail. But we toy sentimentally with the idea that it might have succeeded, which is meaningless. There is more to Frank's failure, however, because it is this which gives Archy the crown, or at any rate the martyr's wreath. Why should Frank be *morally* defeated by Archy? Let us be clear about it: he is. Archy, as already observed, always wins the race, and the race is, ultimately, a moral one. Moreover, just as Archy deliberately handicapped himself in the first race against Frank (where he ran with wounded feet), so, in the last, he is also handicapped. After all, he *wills* to sacrifice himself, just as he wills to run with hurt feet. He could have taken the job of runner, but he gave it to an unsuspecting Frank. So he dies instead of Frank. At this point the Christ parallel is inescapable, though Weir does not press it. Archy, then, is doubly endorsed. He dies, and for someone else.

Absurdities abound here. A blond (read British) Australian lays down his life for a reluctant Irish Australian when, historically, people like Archy, serving causes like Archy's, have not *saved* Irish lives but *taken* them. Obviously Weir has not heard of Easter, 1916 (in the year following Gallipoli), or of Belfast, 1982. Of course one can generously imagine a possible reconciliation of the two sides of these conflicts. And that is all the parable at the end of the film is: *imaginary*. But this is only one mystification, as we ponder the *meaning* (the objective, not the intended, sentimental meaning) of Frank's failure. Doesn't Frank run fast enough, that is to say, try hard enough? Or is it just that the blond, blue-eyed Australians will not *listen* to people like him? This second possibility is effectively negated by the ending of the film, i.e. by the apotheosis of Archy. Had Frank had his way Archy would not have died — or even been there at Gallipoli. But Archy — and this is the essential message of the film — *has* to die. Dying is his supreme achievement, his



Mel Gibson as Frank and Mark Lee as Aschy. On this occasion both are wearing hats but even here the difference in the hats reflects the difference in their social status.

*Photographs by courtesy of Paramount Picture Corporation*

glory, his fate. Only one conclusion is possible, then: that this film endorses Archy's way as superior to Frank's. Frank tries, but Archy makes it.

And yet Weir makes Frank the voice of reason. All the more damning that *Gallipoli* should in the end give itself wholly to the ecstatic contemplation of Archy's sacrifice. Actually it was never a question of anything else. The pairing of Frank and Archy perfectly illustrates the mechanism of give a little, take a lot. Frank's caveat serves only to underline the central message. Archy was, all along, the innocent, the spotless lamb, worthy of sacrifice. In the same way Weir's film as a whole, for all its supposed open-mindedness, its up-to-dateness, its trendy tolerance — indeed *because* of all these things — *reinforces* the Gallipoli myth, and in the most uncritical way. The logic of giving in order to take leads to this conclusion: *even if the war was dubious, the sacrifice was good.*

Sixty-six years after the event, all Australians can do is to retell the self-same story, with the self-same moral. This myopia extends to detail after detail of the film. Weir introduces the wooden horse only to negate its implicit irony at the end. He shows us a confused general and an unpleasant colonel only to highlight the goodness of a major and of the troops themselves. In a crudely hammed scene he offers us a caricature of English officers in Egypt, complete with monocle and moustache. Of course the democratic Anzacs show them up. This reveals the British as foolish in one minor stereotyped instance, only to obscure the fact that the Anzacs are fighting for them and so to endorse the larger military escapade. Later the massacre on the ridge will be blamed (inaccurately) on the British landing at Suvla Bay. Local criticism substitutes for a searching analysis of the social and political facts of the war. The invincible stupidity of Weir's film consists precisely in this: that it points something out only to forget it promptly. *Gallipoli* is like a magician's act: now you see it, now you don't. In the end you don't.

The film, as earlier stated, is structured around the opposition of Innocence and Experience. Of course this innocence is itself a myth which needs to be challenged. No doubt in 1915 Australians were naïve and a little provincial, just as they are today. But that is hardly the same thing as innocence. Subjectively, *Gallipoli* may have had the quality of a dream, or of a nightmare. Objectively, it was a real war, fought by real people against real people. That is to say it was a *political*, not a mythical, act. Interestingly, Weir's film never looks *closely* at the fighting. Most of the time is spent in Western Australia and Egypt, and once at Gallipoli, we move very quickly to Archy's death. This provides no time for the depiction of disillusionment at Anzac Cove. But the

Diggers *did* become disillusioned, eventually. In the film we see them in high spirits, at least up to the point where they are being massacred on the ridge. However, this comes at the very end of the film, and everything is over before we have time to think. This is in contrast to the time lavished on establishing the motif of innocence.

Consequently *Gallipoli* offers its protagonists no possibility of learning from their experience. First Archy is innocent, then he is — dead. Nor does it offer the audience this possibility. Because Weir only wants to do one thing, to focus attention on the legend, which in this context may be defined as an unexamined assumption. When the guide shows us the Mona Lisa in the Louvre, he does not encourage us to examine it, to actually look at it. It is a masterpiece, a myth. Enough to see the myth. *Gallipoli* is Australia's enigmatic Mona Lisa. We are not *supposed* to look. Or rather, when we look, we are supposed to see only the stereotypes: youthful idealism, self-sacrifice, and so on. Of course Weir will object that he did not want to make a political film, just to see it all through the eyes of a simple soldier. There must have been people like Archy at Gallipoli. Unfortunately such 'realism' is anything but neutral. To present the archy legend uncritically is not apolitical, far from it.

We now turn to a very different kind of objectivity, concentrating on Archy and Frank and especially that moment of glory at the top of the ridge at Gallipoli. Exactly like the heroine of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Archy disappears at the summit of a rock. In each case the context is shrouded in mystery. This parallel points up other aspects of *Gallipoli's* hero.

Superficially Archy seems to choose his course of action whereas Frank seems to be carried along. This is totally misleading. In fact it is Archy who is passive. In the first scene we see him as a running machine, manipulated by an older man. Later he seems to know his own mind, but his enlisting is another expression of his passivity, since he is doing what everyone is expected to do. At the end he appears to choose when he changes places with Frank, but that too is passive, a submission to his own fate. Archy's passivity, which the film does not recognize, is the source of his innocent simplicity. By contrast Frank is complex, problematical. It is important to see that what is implicit in this contrast is the kind of opposition of Subject and Object so persuasively analysed by Sartre. Archy has all the characteristics of the Object. He is presented as an image without depth, smiling that open, vulnerable smile which prefigures his final wound. The smile *is* Archy. It conveys his inarticulate, uncomplicated goodness, his status as Object — because Archy's smile represents an *offering* of himself to others, to Frank, to the audience. Just

as he is passive in the eyes of his audience, Archy is passive before his fate: he is carried along to Gallipoli. We know he will die because his passivity anticipates that too. Archy is made for death. A corpse is the ultimate Object. It has no existence for itself. It exists only as Object of another's mind. The essential feature of Archy, then, is that he is there to be *looked at*. That, incidentally, is why he comes across as *beautiful*.

Frank on the other hand resists objectification. Where Archy is, Frank is conscious, he is active, he *thinks*. He is to Archy as mind is to body. Consequently he is not borne along, he seems to *resist* fate. In Sartrean terms he takes responsibility for his actions, no matter how confused these might be. All this explains why there is no mystery about him. Archy of course is mysterious, even to himself. We know why Frank enlists, more or less: he is pushed into it through opportunism (when he tries to join the Light Horse) and mateship (when he joins the infantry). But why does Archy enlist? To be like uncle Jack? The only answer is in that smile which seems to suggest that Archy knows, which he doesn't. For Archy it is all so — inevitable.

Now the film pays lip service to Frank's reasonable point of view. Its affection, however, is reserved for Archy. One is reminded of those (homosexual) pairs in Jean Genet's novels consisting of an outward, unthinking, attractive personality and a partner who is inward, keenly intelligent, *owers*. The first is the one on whom Genet lavishes attention, but only to demonstrate at last that this beautiful Object is hollow, that real power resides with thought, not with the Image, the Mask. Because the Object is by nature vulnerable, it collapses under the weight of the adoring eyes fixed on it, like Marilyn Monroe.

The Subject survives, the Object dies: that is the rule and it is scrupulously observed in *Gallipoli*. We note at once a lack of distinct personal characteristics in Archy. One example: when the Diggers are confronted by sex in Egypt they respond either with coarse enthusiasm or puritanically (Barney and Billy enter the brothel; Snowy refuses). Archy, though, is kept well clear of a situation like this: he is untainted by whoring or by puritanism. This is necessary not simply to ensure the purity of his sacrifice but also to maintain his status as a *mask*, that is, something other than a real human being.

And this is the insidious fascination of the Object: that what attracts us is precisely the inhuman perfection of the statue, the work of art. The last scene of *Gallipoli* can come as no surprise. The entire film has prepared us for Archy's apotheosis, which is his dying. Its aim is to elevate not an individual (like Frank), but the Hero, the Myth, the Smile. We all share in this mystique. Kill Frank and we kill one man, on one



occasion. Kill Archy and we objectify Death itself, we evoke all the pathos of a death which is eternal. That last frozen shot of the movie is no aberration. *Gallipoli* really does glorify death, long before Archy actually dies. Weir does not intend this, of course. It simply happens, and it happens because the image of Archy is something Weir is unable to control. The fascination of Archy is the fascination of death or rather of life-in-death, which is life-in-myth. *They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old*. Archy lives on in death, and he never ages. Frank, who is alive, is mortal: he will age. Archy is immortal.

There are terrifying contradictions in all of this. Archy's glory is a mask without a human face behind it. As preparation for death Archy repeats his uncle's words of authority, the magical spell (it is nothing short of that) whose utterance has the power to transform him into an animal (a leopard, to be precise) or a machine. Archy *wills* himself to be something other than a human Subject, he wills, in the end, that transformation which makes him timeless and therefore material for myth. What chance has Frank in this race? Sadly, it is a tragic vacuousness which is glorified in Archy, the victory of the non-thinking, the non-questioning: ours not to reason why. How on earth has a trendy, tolerant film maker of the 1980s got himself in this predicament?

In this context we are bound to return to the exaltation of sport in the film. (The fact that a football match between Western Australians and Victorians in Egypt reveals the unsporting side of the Diggers, merely points up the larger exaltation of sport in the character of Archy.) Running, like cricket or football, is a type of the national mystique. Life, however, is not comparable to a race or to a game. What is needed in this country is not athletics but thought. Of course Australians have traditionally glorified physical achievement and belittled intellectual efforts. In so doing they have in another way put the Object first.

There is a further perspective on all of this. In our society the Object is quintessentially female. And, sure enough, the hero of *Gallipoli* is closer than one might have thought to the heroine of *Picnic*. He is not just boyishly beautiful: he has something of a girl about him. Actually his relationship with Frank is not without sexual overtones, and, to a degree, Weir and Williamson are probably aware of it. But, as usual, the material escapes their control. It is noteworthy that there are no real women in *Gallipoli*, only two classic types: the type of the chaste mother or wife (in Western Australia), and of the whore (in Egypt). The reason for this is clear: the myth of Gallipoli is a specifically *male* myth. We notice that Frank chases girls. He kisses his partner at the nurses' ball (Archy does not), he performs a male display (complete with Light Horse

feathers) for a group of women visiting the pyramids. Archy is eyed by a lass in Western Australia, but he initiates no moves.

In fact Archy is a virgin, a type of *feminine* purity — who dies. Traditionally, a girl 'dies' when she loses her innocence, that is to say when the maidenhead is broken. The sexual parable of *Gallipoli* is precisely that. Over and above the coy hints of a vaguely sexual bond between two males, *Gallipoli* produces an unintended message: that Archy's sexual consummation comes in death. *Gallipoli* is, from one angle, a drama of virginity lost. When Archy is ravished, he *disappears* (a similar sexual pattern existed in *Picnic*), while Frank, the type of the male, is left to mourn. Anyone prepared to scoff at this line of argument should think very hard first.

Weir's mystification of a vital episode in Australian history has a more sophisticated counterpart in Sidney Nolan's pictures of Gallipoli. Nolan's Gallipoli is a faint, evanescent landscape, peopled by ghostlike Diggers who bathe naked on the beaches, or rather who levitate like apparitions, weightless, drifting. Occasionally there is a suggestion of a uniform, a few strokes of paint, a slouch hat. On the whole, though, nakedness implies vulnerable, passive flesh, the body of someone who is going to die. Then again, Nolan's Diggers are already dead. Like Archy, they are dead long before the bullets come. Their Gallipoli seems very far away. It is a Gallipoli which exists not in Turkey but in Australia. Moreover it exists in the mind, it is strictly timeless, archetypal — if there had not been a Gallipoli, Australians would have invented it. In this context there is no difficulty in seeing a connection with the Homeric epic and, indeed, Nolan's soldiers, in their nakedness, hint at a realm of myth in which Australians fuse with ancient Greeks, re-enacting the siege of Troy. That siege is the archetypal war of the European imagination. Of course, as everyone knows, Gallipoli is not so far from the site of Troy. Weir too cannot resist drawing the parallel in his film. The difference is that Nolan knows that he is painting the myth, whereas Weir is not quite sure what he is doing. Nolan is interested not in the real Gallipoli, but in Gallipoli as it lives on in the Australian psyche. That accounts for the fuzziness of the image: it is all like that dreamy swim in the film, an underwater Gallipoli, deliberately ahistorical.

In the end, though, Nolan's failure is as spectacular as Weir's. What objective meaning is there in the parallel with Troy, except a misleading one? Nolan's earlier myth-making actually *taught* us something about, for example, the archetypal Ned Kelly, the rebel inside us all. That series was both visually and intellectually analytic: it had something to say. The Gallipoli pictures, like Weir's film, preempt analysis, they insist on a

surface reading only. Instead of revealing Gallipoli, they conceal it, they pickle it in a dense, amniotic fluid.

Of course Nolan's Gallipoli paintings are in the Australian War Memorial in Canberra — and they *belong* there. Canberra's neo-Egyptian mausoleum looks down and across the lake to Parliament House. Not one tree is permitted to interfere with the flow of air between these two sites. The two stand in a relation which is broadly that of Archy and Frank. The Memorial is Object to Parliament's Subject. Again, it is to Parliament as Body is to Mind. Across the lake, a lot of mental activity is carried out. At the Memorial, everything is still. Time, in Parliament, feeds on the timelessness of the Memorial. All our allegiance, all our reverence, is for the myth enshrined in the Memorial. For what goes on in the other place, we have nothing but contempt. And yet the other place is where things can be done. Because there can be no action, only the silent perfection of death, in the Memorial.

Ironically, Parliament House, that colonial replica of the Raffles Hotel in Singapore, looks to the Memorial for inspiration. That is the whole point of the axis. It is ironic because, like Weir's film or Nolan's pictures, the Memorial can only offer a contradictory oracle. The Anzac myth cannot be made to yield an unambiguously patriotic content, no matter how hard we try. On the contrary the Memorial speaks, for the most part, of wars fought for other-than-Australian causes. Like Gallipoli, it *negates* nationalism rather than affirming it. And yet it is a place of pilgrimage. Thousands visit it every year.

Thousands will see Peter Weir's film. They will walk away just a little more confused than they went in. The question arises: why are Australians so loth to see themselves as they are? If after all these years they cannot focus on 1915, when will they focus on 1975, or 1982?

## Big Smoke Woman

'Are you going west?' she asked when we first met that night in the café of a 24-hour petrol station in South Australia.

I could hardly believe what I'd walked into.

'I'm going through to Perth,' I replied.

She looked like Carly Simon off the album covers, the sort of body object I had always wanted for a girlfriend.

Even then I'd the feeling that the wailing jukebox, countless cups of coffee and chain-smoked roll-your-owns was all on her territory.

We drove for miles on small talk feeling each other out by the dim light of the instrument panel and flashes of distant lightning.

Where are you going? How long have you been on the road? What music do you like and where do you think's the best surf in Australia?

She must have been feeling pretty pally then because she put her head on my lap and tried to stretch out across the front seat.

'My boyfriend's waiting for me in Perth. He's a real spunky guy. He's a Californian. His old man's loaded. We're going overseas in January, soon as he can get the bread together.'

I didn't have a girlfriend so I shut up. Later I told her I was on holiday from a boring abattoir job in northern N.S.W. and wasn't worried if I ever went back. I was driving towards bigger waves and some vague idea of finding my real value across the other side of the continent in Margaret River.

The night and highway rolled on.

'You want to be in a surf movie,' she ventured after a long quiet.

I told her I wasn't real fussed.

She continued that some friends of hers were making a surf movie at Cactus Beach and that we ought to detour from the highway and spend the night there.

We did. But there was no surf and no surf movie. All we saw was her old ex-boyfriend.

She was pleased though.

I think he was all she wanted to go there for.

We drove all the next day taking turns at the wheel. She was pissed off and taking it out on my accelerator. The heat and dust of the Nullabor and being cooped up in my car didn't help. She was menstruating too.

'Got any old rag?' she asked that morning before we left Cactus.

'No, I haven't. What do you want rag for?'

'What the fuck do you think?'

I managed to get out that there were a couple of *Dawn* 'date-rolls' in the boot of my car.

'They're no use,' she replied.

I gave her a couple of dollars when we arrived in the next town.

I was pretty quiet on the highway. I didn't think there was much I knew or had experienced that would interest her, not right then. She carried the conversation anyway. I've usually found it's easier when I just listen to people, I can't make as many mistakes that way. I realized she knew a lot on subjects I had only just heard about.

She knew the intimate histories of 'The Band' and Dylan and Nilsson and Crosby, Stills and the others.

I listened but a lot went over me.

She school-mammed when I told her I hardly ever listened to the words of songs on the radio.

'You really should. That's the main part,' she enthused.

'Most of them I can't hear the words they're singing, and when I can they keep just going over and over. I guess I listen mostly to the music,' I explained.

During her explanation of the Age of Aquarius and the hidden meanings of Lennon/McCartney, it somehow came up that I didn't know what a 'roach' was.

'You sure you come from Byron?' she prodded. 'I thought everybody up there smoked.'

It was out. I was a bumpkin.

She was eighteen (that's what she told me), one year younger, but she seemed so much more sure of herself. It must have had to do with her father being a professor at Adelaide University — the same place she had already dropped out of.

I was from a family who all left school early and were meatworkers.

She was like somebody from another world.

'Jesus you're a fucking bore!' she started after another long silence. 'You're too quietest. You're so ... so cold, and withdrawn. You don't even think. I've spent fuck knows how long with you and I can't remember a single intelligent thing you've said. You're sooo booooooringggg.'

Coming from her it hurt. I'd always had this idea — some people call it ego I think — that I was cool and all women loved me, well almost all, and her criticisms sliced through this idea of myself like a just finely steeled knife. She only made me withdraw further.

We were quiet for a long time.

Then she tried to apologise saying she was sick, had had no sleep, was up all night screwing and smoking hash with her ex.

I sulked and brooded and fiddled with the car radio.

We were so far out in the desert it would only pull in one station and it seemed to play only classical music. Even then the signal was weak and interfered with.

I turned it off.

Power and telephone lines running parallel to highways and the people who put them there must be the curse of all long-distance drivers I thought.

I forced myself to hum a tune.

'That's Donovan isn't it?' She knew all the answers.

I slid deeper into myself and my driving.

'I can see you're a real sensitive person,' she started. 'But you shouldn't let your emotions run your life, you've got to control it with intelligence.'

It struck deep.

If only I could, it'd be the answer to all my problems, I'd be in control. I thought about that for a long time, until she got going again.

She wanted me to buy her more tobacco, some dope or a bottle of 'Southern Comfort'.

She wanted to get out of it and I wanted to keep on going. I entertained it, but didn't want to and couldn't bring myself to throw her out.

Then it happened. She was driving in her brief undies and halter-top with her left leg drawn up lotus style looking out her window at the desert. She was pretty good at making herself at home.

'Did you know, a cheetah in the African desert has been clocked at 150 MPH,' she told me.

'No.'

'They can. They've been clocked at 150 MPH and faster, I saw it on tv.'

I looked at the speedometer.

'I didn't know that,' I paused marshalling facts. 'A hundred and fifty's pretty fast ... I thought they could only do about 60 — flat out. My little brother got the Guinness Book of Records for his birthday. I read about it in that.'

'Yeah, well I saw it on a tv special.'

'Look, we're doing 70, 80 now, do you reckon a cheetah'd be able to keep up with us. A hundred and fifty is twice as fast as we're going now.'

She jerked back and took a deep breath.

'Yeah, well they can run really fast.'

That shut her up.

Anyway, I knew I was right. I knew I was more right than she was.

It was dark when we entered the eucalypt forest and it started drizzling. Wallabies were on the road licking the steaming bitumen. I slowed to 45 but had to stop every couple of hundred meters or so and blow the horn and yell. A few times I thought I'd have to get out of the car and move them bodily.

She wasn't much help.

'We used to slow down to 50 and drive along on low beam, that's what we should be doing,' or 'Go on! Stick your head out and yell at them.'

But the novelty of the wallabies and cool rain had changed my mood. I let her words run down off me like the drizzle on the windscreen.

I had to slow further. The drizzle and frequency of wallabies increased. And they seemed to get more stubborn.

'We might as well stop the night at the next motel,' I suggested. I'd been waiting for an excuse like this all along.

She insisted it be a double bed.

We had a big meal in the dining room and went to our room and showered.

I offered up the theory that the water was salty because it was probably from an artesian bore.

'Yeah, maybe,' she admitted with just a towel wrapped round her.

I wondered how she lived on junk food, hard liquor and dope and still kept her body so attractive. Then I remembered her telling me about old businessmen treating her to slap-up meals in fancy restaurants and big cash handouts, 'treated me like their own daughter', she'd said.

I wondered how it was I found her with no money expecting to make it to Perth.

She lowered herself into bed like it was a hot bath. I busied myself in my suitcase trying to decide what to wear yet knowing I was beyond the impressing-her-stage. Then she picked up on the three copies of MAD I had in the suitcase.

'Fuck, not MAD. Don't tell me you read that crap. Typical poofta gremlin conformist Australian male youth behaviour,' or something, she bumbled.

What did it matter now I thought. I walked to my side of the bed and dropped my towel while she spouted how sheepish Australian youth were according to Nat Young.

She didn't notice me slip out of my oldest pair of navy blue y-fronts and under the sheets.

'Have you had much experience?' she queried lighting a smoke.

'Nope. Only a ... couple of women,' I said trying to sound cool.

She eyed me as she huffed and puffed on another cigarette. The motel was silent except for the steady patter of rain on tin roofs.

'You're not like the other men I've been with.'

I wondered if there was something wrong with me.

'What do you mean?'

'They've always finished screwing before we get out of the car.'

I wondered whether this was the sign for me to begin. I think I must have been hard or in one of the various stages of being hard ever since she insisted on the double bed back on the highway. It must have been a couple of hours at least.

I drew in the contours of her body covered by the thin sheet. She made me feel the long skinny boy-man I knew I looked. She was so much more developed than any girl I'd fucked before. They all seemed like school-girls alongside. Both of them were.

She would be my first big 'real' woman.

I wondered if I should do something special, something I'd only read about like eat her out or fuck her between the tits or something.

'What's the matter?' she asked.

'Nothing.' Well here goes I thought.

I rolled and slid across to her and took her in what I'd always thought a romantic embrace. Her tits were nice and warm and her nipples stabbed into me. I slid my knee up between her thighs and ran two fingers along and into her still dry vagina.

But I felt no urgency. Nothing. There was only that small complaining part of me needling me to fuck her. Some other part had the brakes on. My heart just wasn't in it.



I lay there like a baby, listening to my heart-thump, myself breathe, staring past her.

'What's the matter with you now?' she whined, 'I haven't got all night. I've gotta get some sleep.'

'I dunno. Something's wrong.' I felt a nuisance. 'I can do it with other girls.' I disentangled and lay on my back.

She was quiet for awhile and I noticed she had the cigarette going again.

'You've been really good to me Peter. You took me to Cactus, bought me stuff ... really taken care of me. I want to repay you. Screwing is the only way I can make it up to you.'

It stuck in my mind. I was silent.

'C'mon Pete, what's the matter?' she cheered stubbing out her cigarette. She rolled on top of me and tickled me.

I lay there staring at the ceiling trying to push her away. I felt cold inside. Nothing was funny anymore.

'Shit! What's the matter with you? If you don't get it on soon I'm going to go to sleep,' she proclaimed. 'I'm going to have one more smoke and then it's lights out.'

Everything was slipping away. I felt for my cock knowing it had retracted to the size it takes on in cold water.

'I dunno. It's like, it's like I've got something to live up to...' The words were lost. I noticed her cigarette was nearly finished.

She caught me looking and we stared at each other. She reached a hand across and took my grub-like cock. She kneaded and squeezed it like I wasn't attached.

'Jesus,' she sighed. Her handwork got rougher until she was just squashing it.

I took her hand away and lay there silent.

'I was trying to say ... it's got something to do with my family, the way I was brought up. Something...' I agonized after words.

'Shit! What've they got to do with it? It's you. You're the only one here,' she sighed. 'Or are you going to get your family to come and do it for you?'

'I said ... it's to do with my family and the way I was brought up,' I said feeling surer, 'with church and school, and sunday school and ... everything, life. You know, childhood, and growing up, what you're taught, at home, school, everything ... like ...'

'You're fucked, you're really fucked, you know that.'

I was beyond caring.

'Yeah, I know. At least I know I'm crazy, not like some people. They're crazy and they don't know it,' was my stock reply. My father had taught me well but it was little consolation. I rolled over away from her and stared at the wall.

'I'm going to put the light out now, I'm rooted — figuratively,' she imparted.

I lay there staring skimming through my childhood and the sex and psychology sections of magazines I'd read, searching for the answer to get it up or get to sleep.

She exhaled loudly behind me.

I could hear her groping for a cigarette.

I waited till she struck the match and I rolled over.

'I don't give a fuck, if it takes me till I'm fifty — I'm gonna work myself out.'

'Yeah ... you do that,' she murmured drawing back behind her red glow.

JENNIFER STRAUSS

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## An Unsentimental Romance: Christina Stead's *For Love Alone*<sup>1</sup>

It is an odd aspect of Australian literature that the poets have been — at least until fairly recently — a rather sober lot stylistically. It is in the work of novelists like Patrick White and Christina Stead that we find Gothic extravagances of associative language and imagination, visions of the external world as changed, if not necessarily with the grandeur of God, at least with something more than mild pathetic fallacy. At the same time, both are uncomfortable writers, less because their intensity sometimes

topples over into verbosity and portentousness than because the heat of their intensity co-exists with a chill generated by a strong distaste for, and often remarkably acute observation of, the flaws and the moral bankruptcies of human beings.

It is an unsentimental writer who sets out to explore the theme of love in the romantically titled *For Love Alone*.<sup>3</sup> Published in 1945, it was her sixth major publication,<sup>4</sup> a point which needs to be stressed because the critical memory has a treacherous tendency to slide this novel into an earlier position, directly after *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. There are reasons of both style and content. Stylistically, *For Love Alone* has a less ambitious structural organization than *House of All Nations*, while it is less richly textured in its symbolism and has less sense of a world fully inhabited by characters than *The Man Who Loved Children*. Characters of considerable initial interest — Teresa's emotionally tyrannical father, depressed sister and disturbed brothers, the ebullient Aunt Bea, frustrated Anne and flirtatious Clara — rapidly fade from the scene. There is, however, a logic in this: thematically, the isolation of Jonathan and Teresa from other people is the cumulative result of his pathological selfishness and her obsessed absorption into her unsatisfactory relationship with him. The structural pattern, a classic Romantic one, also militates against full development of secondary characters: the protagonist, estranged from context by visionary demands, must voyage out on a solitary quest to a final single-handed fight for more than life with a formidable adversary. In this case, Stead gives a novel twist to the pattern by having the protagonist discover that the object of her quest is in fact the adversary to be overcome.

From the material of the novel, a relatively early date might be assumed because of the Australian setting and the apparently directly autobiographical nature of some of the material, notably that depicting Teresa's rejection of a 'career' as a teacher, her determination to leave Australia, and the body-destroying penury she endures while struggling, as an office-worker, to save up the money for her fare to England.

As far as the Australian setting is concerned, it is offered for the most part unselfconsciously. On the one hand Stead apparently did not feel in this case the extra-artistic pressure that moved her to transfer the action of *The Man Who Loved Children* to America lest her own family be too easily recognizable in that of the novel.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Stead *in absentia* seems never to have felt obliged to take up the kind of task that White, coming uneasily home, set himself in *The Tree of Man*, i.e. the Joycean (or Dedeleian) artistic burden of articulating the unforged conscience of the native land. Rather, she presents the Australian setting

quite simply as the historically 'natural' habitat of the characters she is interested in. It is a city setting, Stead being essentially an urban novelist.<sup>3</sup> But where the social-realist Australian novels such as Kylie Tennant's *Foureaux* produce a photographed city (even if tinted by both affection and outrage), Stead, stimulated like Dickens by the rich particularity-cum-generality of a large city, produces an imagined one. Indeed in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* that city, in the exuberance of its physical presence, often overshadows its inhabitants. In *For Love Alone*, with the focus narrowed from her earlier sweeping celebrations of the unmanageable energies of the phenomenal world, the lyrically effusive treatment has been disciplined. Although the essential method remains an elaboration of detail bonded by a dominant (or shifting) mood, that mood is here more clearly narratively involved with the experience and preoccupations of the characters. Probably the best instance of such writing is the extended passage at the beginning of Chapter 5 presenting Teresa's night walk back home after Malfi's wedding, of which this must serve as a representative sample:

In this hot night, not only the rocks above her, half-naked among twisted, tooth-leaved trees and spiny bushes, but the little open park she was now approaching, the grass above the dripping rocks of the military reserve, and the tram-shelters, were full of semitones and broken whispers. The rocks, the trees, the timbers of the houses, stained by storms, the back yards full of plasterers' rubbish, the niches in the stony undercliff were refuges of love.

She came out from the lane, crossed the road and skirted the park. Near the seesaw, on the short grass, lay a black sharpe, unmoving. When she passed it, she saw it was a man over a woman, the woman's white gloves and bag lay on the grass beside them. They caught pickpockets in the Bay. Near the Old Hotel two more, the woman on her back and the man on his elbow, lay looking into each other's eyeballs, reflecting the moon. There were none of them on the beach tonight, drowned under the high tide; none in the boats drawn up across the footpath, people sat in their moist warm gardens, talking and hiving out at the mosquitoes; the smell of eucalyptus oil and pipe-smoke reached out. Across the harbour, on the opaquely coloured water, a large Masby ferry full of lights moved southwards toward the city. She felt the swarm of lovers thick as locusts behind her when she turned into the beach path. Tied up to the fourth pile of the wharf was a rowing boat covered with a tarpaulin. Under the tarpaulin was a woman's body; she had been fished out of the sea just outside of the cliffs that afternoon; it did not cause much comment. They lived there, among the gardens of the sea, and knew their fruits: fish, worms, corpses, mooncicles, miracles (pp.63-4).

The initial Australian setting does, however, lend a particular authenticity to the central element of the novel's very simple narrative line, the voyage away. This must not be confused with the voyage 'home' characteristic of novels concerned, like those of Martin Boyd, with an earlier

generation. By the time of which Stead writes, the intercontinental magnet drawing Australians was, as with the American earlier, a cultural one. Their sense of provincialism could not be assuaged by mere transition from Milwaukee to New York or Dimboola to Melbourne. It is this which is distinctive about Jonathan and Teresa. Apart from this the problems of poor, intellectually ambitious youth in an urban society where social and sexual restrictions are intensified by economic depression are not very specific to Australia as distinct from England or America.

There is, unfortunately, one grating moment of self-consciousness about the Australian setting: the Prologue, an awkward hybrid between ingratiating apology to the superior 'reality' of the Old World and an ill-judged, pared-down version of the prize-essay extravaganza on Australia delivered late in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* by Kol Blount. Even in a novel in which one had become acclimatized to verbal explosions being more or less loosely tied to the personages, that one seemed expendable. Its echo here seems inadequately justified by a possible function of introducing the voyager symbolism, foreshadowing, in its closing reference, the later characterization by Teresa of her own voyage as 'the rigmarole of a buffoon Odyssey' (p.348). Within an established context, this expresses with both pathos and sharpness Teresa's realization that her passion for Jonathan, and the consequent arduous journey towards a lover whom she has envisaged, not without encouragement, as faithfully awaiting her — that all this has been largely the result of her imperfect grasp of reality, her appetite for living mythologically, for being 'noble, loved, glorious'. We accept both the conventional symbol and the unconventional characterizing adjective as appropriate to the established character and situation. At the beginning, the Odyssean references are resisted as literary name-dropping, stylistic hectoring.

To revert from setting to the matter of autobiographical content and its bearing on our idea of the maturity of the art in the novel. Stead makes no secret of there being autobiographical elements scattered through the novels; what is interesting is the way in which such elements mutate as they become parts in distinct formal and thematic structures. She has said that Baruch Mendelsohn of *Seven Poor Men* 'is' the man she later married; it is probably more important that we discern something of the same character, differently selected and emphasized in both Alphendéry of *House of All Nations* and James Quick in *For Love Alone*. A measure of identification of herself when young with Teresa and with Louisa of *The Man Who Loved Children* is obvious; it would be impertinent to ask if she 'is' Catherine of *Seven Poor Men*, and yet any reader is

likely to see in Catherine a version of the others lost, as she goes under to the incestuous attachment to her brother which Teresa manages to avoid early in *For Love Alone* and as circumstances offer her the salvation neither of a lover nor an energetic talent.

It is after all an ill-founded assumption that autobiographical material is restricted to, and exhausted by, a writer's earliest work. Dickens, for instance, did not make use of his trials in the blacking factory until *David Copperfield*, and one may well consider that Stead achieves a more distanced art with Teresa's trials than Dickens does with David's; which is just as well, since in her case they constitute a major component of the novel. If they are long-drawn-out, it is not because Stead lacks emotional control of her material, or is not able to subdue style to structure. There are indeed times in her novels when the amplification of detail seems merely manic; Randall Jarrell has described her writing as having, at its worst, 'a kind of vivacious, mechanical over-abundance'.<sup>4</sup> In this case, however, Stead is seriously addressing the problem of conveying poverty, not as spotlighted in moments of high melodrama, but as felt in the texture of its daily grinding pettinesses, especially when initial penuriousness is compounded by obsession into something very like avarice. It is a method that has integrity, if it lacks the pathos of the death of Jo the street-sweeper in *Bleak House* or the horror of the children's death in *Jude the Obscure*.

Apart from autobiographical elements, and more importantly, *For Love Alone* shares a number of thematic preoccupations with the preceding novels, for all their very different narratives. In each of them, Stead presents human life struggling against interwoven psychological and socio-economic pressures, pressures which militate against an individual's achievement (more or less conscious) of fulfillment of being for the natural self: the tensions of family bonds, the burdens of money and of poverty, the constraints of social values and expectations. Some characters follow the logic of despair to suicide — Michael Baguenault in *Seven Poor Men*, Henny in *The Man Who Loved Children*. Others, like Jo Baguenault or Miss Haviland in *For Love Alone*, retain in the acceptance of the limitations of their lives a survivor's integrity, untainted by either despair or envy. They are, however, and they recognize this, less interesting than the contenders, those who fight for their selfhood, pursuing it under various guises, notably those of truth, justice, freedom, love.

When such contenders take up ideas as the instrument of their quest, they run special risks: the hazards of corrosive fanaticism or, more frequently in Stead's novels, of fake idealisms which erode the character's

grasp of both self and the outside world. Stead seems at once fascinated by, and distrustful of, ideas. She understands their power to exhilarate, the opportunities they offer for verbal excitement and display indeed she seems to suggest that they are indispensable for full humanity; at the same time she is aware of ideas as tyrants and destroyers. Distrust of ideas is often regarded as an Australian characteristic, or as a feminine one, but Stead's attitude to ideas, and her presentation of them in action, probably owes quite as much to certain late nineteenth century authors whom she has cited as influencing her, notably Ibsen, Chekhov and Dostoyevsky. The generalizing, perhaps slightly 'old-fashioned' discussion dialogue of her novels is one aspect of this. More particularly, Sam Pollitt and Jonathan Crow are really more like Ibsen's sick souls than the monsters of critical labelling. It is ironic that Jonathan should cite, with approval, an Ibsen character, when he has clearly learnt so little from reading Ibsen's plays (p. 336).

In the works preceding *For Love Alone*, some of the contenders meet fates which we may, rather mournfully, regard as characteristically modern: Catherine and Henny fall to madness and suicide; Jules of *House of All Nations*, on the other hand, cultivates hedonism, walking off unscathed, but somewhat inhuman, from the collapse of the financial *dense macabre* which makes up the action of that novel. It is Louisa of *The Man Who Loved Children* and Teresa retaining something of conventional heroic stature, who win through against odds to a point where they have at least gained growing space. That that growing space is in neither case the one traditionally allotted to heroines modifies the conventionality of the structure; it does not, I think, constitute a feminist manifesto.

There has been a good deal of confusion, and some heat, over Stead and feminism. Some has been due to excess of zeal, some to problems of terminological inexactitude so besetting that one hesitates to enter the fray. Nonetheless, it can be said that Stead takes, if by assumption rather than by argument, a position fundamental to philosophical feminism, namely that the experience of the female is as much primary human experience as that of the male. It is therefore obviously able to claim a novelist's serious attention, having a value as much essential, neither more nor less contingent than that of the male. James Quick rapidly discerns that Jonathan is incapable of accepting this, and that all his theories about the necessity of female independence are merely defensive against that dependence which he believes must result from his own centrality, a dependence indeed which gratifies him almost more than it terrifies.

The particular nature of Stead's seriousness however makes it unlikely that she will be a political feminist, interested in either the particular powers or, more probably, the particular powerlessness, the victimization, of women as a group. It is not merely that her clear perception that there are injustices unique to women does not lead her to conclude, even in polemic, that injustice itself is unique to women. The whole tenor of her mind, robustly romantic in its emphasis on the power, and indeed the obligation, of the individual to be itself, makes her finally more interested in what characters, male or female, do to themselves, rather than what is done to them.<sup>7</sup>

A close examination of Teresa and her experience may serve to test these propositions; it is also the best way to understand the novel, since it is Teresa's experience that is central to it, however striking Jonathan may be as a psychological study. It is above all through Teresa that Stead resolves one of the novelist's abiding problems, the tension between generality and specificity, a tension articulated within the novel by Teresa in Chap. 22, pp.252-3:

To solve the question of why students suffer when they come out into the world: for one thing, learning is too general, there are not enough particular sciences. If there are fifteen or sixteen shades, and more, in the sky we call sky blue, and so in everything we have a simple name for, how can this one word, 'sky-blue', satisfy every perception? This sky-blue can be depicted in a hundred ways. Again, sensation is vague, the five senses boiling in the brain, a stew of insights, confuse us further, and so fifteen or sixteen blues can produce a hundred or more sensations.... The greatest sensations become the most general and the least concerned with that particular adjusted interlocking which is any kind of relation to the outside world. If the greatest sensations become hooked on to any outside thing or person, our heads are turned: our heads are turned by confusion. Language is simply not large enough and though English is said to have the most synonyms and the most words altogether, it still lacks hundreds of thousands of words. The words, joy, love, excitement, are bald and general. That is why love stories I suppose sound so dull, for the heroine or hero cannot feel just love, it must be one of a hundred kinds of love he feels.

The Teresa we find as the novel begins is a particularly suitable medium for the investigation of at least some of the hundred kinds of love. Her age places her at that awkward stage of transition from the 'given' ties of family to the games of choice played by adult love. Her sex, her social status, and the nature of her education make it all too probable that she should be engrossed by the idea of love, convinced that her value as a person is contingent upon receiving a love of which marriage will be the visible certification; convinced indeed at times with some desperation



that the outward and visible sign of marriage may be more important than the inward and spiritual grace of love, and thoroughly confused about the role of sex in either. This need hardly surprise as her society, which can and does talk about ideal, sentimental, and economic aspects of marriage, is incapable of talking about marriage as sexual except in innuendos, sighs, and smutty jokes.

Teresa speaks in the passage above of 'a stew of insights'; the reader may well feel that the first hundred or so pages of *For Love Alone* offer a stew of suppressed and/or distorted sexuality. Nonetheless, the picture Stead gives, although emphatically and sometimes idiosyncratically highlighted, has a great deal of essential truth about sexual attitudes in that society at that period. Teresa belongs to that society but is embarked upon the process of rebellion and separation. It is part of her innocence that she does not fully realize just how disturbing are the perceptions and ideas she insists on voicing. It is this, as much as the ideas themselves, that marks her off as an eccentric, an experience she finds painful rather than flattering. 'She did not want to be eccentric, but on the contrary to be noble, loved, glorious, admired: perfect as far as she could be perfect' (p.65).

Teresa's intelligence is important. Its relative lack of formal training, along with her capacity to verbalize, allows the encounters between her experience and her intelligence to be very direct and personal, even when she is intent upon ordering them into abstractions as fast as possible. There might be a good deal of pathos in the spectacle of Teresa's gallant attempts to match her experience to the grab-bag of intellectual bits and pieces provided for her by discussion groups, libraries, lovers, if it were not for the toughness and resilience of her spirit and of her physicality.

For Teresa, as well as being intelligent, has a large stock of animal receptivity and energy, a capacity for joy which survives all her reckless depletion of it in her devotion to Jonathan, and which awaits her sexual awakening. The Teresa we meet initially, although having some theoretical acquaintance with sexuality, is not so much sexually awakened as in a diffuse state of sexual exacerbation. This leads at times to an irritable dismissal of the physical aspect of love, an acceptance of Jonathan's disparagement of it as lust so that it can be dismissed high-handedly from consideration — 'Love has nothing to do with all that' (p.248). It is the cultivation of this exacerbation and denial in her relationship with Jonathan that threatens to destroy her.

Jonathan, while bad for Teresa, is clearly extremely useful for Stead. The glib and perverse theoretician of love provides for plenty of dis-

cussion, as well as demonstrating that disillusion can be quite as delusive as illusion and, at least in this case, a good deal nastier. We are not really surprised to find him eventually a classic late Victorian figure of sexual repression, impotent except with a woman of the servant class, whom he can despise, and to whom he does not even have to make the payment that would be required by a prostitute. Even before he has been fully shown in action, Stead's first extended portrait of him (Chap. 17, pp.198-201) shows us a man threatened by joy, greedy for life but life-denying, essentially if not technically impotent: in short, and by name, a carrion bird.

From this fate — which is death — Teresa is 'saved' for life by the rather obviously named James Quick. This, the standard and by no means unreasonable reading of the final action, has led to some disappointment in feminist circles, being seen as an endorsement of the notion that females depend upon males for their identity.

Certainly Stead does not seem to entertain for Teresa either of the two possible endings we might find to a feminist fable: a switch to lesbian relationship(s) or a shift altogether away from sexual love as a central preoccupation, fulfillment being located in some engrossing cause or occupation. The former would have been a much more radical *dénouement* in 1945 than in 1982, but that would probably not have deterred Stead if she had, in fact, considered it a desirable conclusion for Teresa. This seems unlikely, if we can judge by *Cotter's England*, where the mere adumbration of such an outcome is enough to give final impetus to the suicidal Caroline. The latter resolution has been presented with considerable sympathy and power by a number of recent novelists but only Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* comes to mind as seriously suggesting this at the very outset of the heroine's sexual life. Moreover, Sybylla reminds us that nothing in Teresa's life has offered an engrossing alternative to love; certainly not teaching, the possibilities of which for someone with sensitivity but without vocation are sketched by Stead with deadly accuracy.

That Stead, in the end, simply seems to share Teresa's conviction that love is important, that commitment to the joy and the pain of loving is necessary for vitality, and that this applies to both sexes, is indicated by the final scene (pp.500-01) in which Jonathan appears. As the dreaded bogey of spinsterdom, which haunted Teresa at the beginning, is suddenly transferred to bachelorhood, we are amused by the neat working out in the action of Jonathan's repeated tag-line 'The whirligig of time brings its revenge' (pp. 169, 340-1). But Teresa was right to flee from spinsterhood, just as Jonathan has been wrong in choosing to be 'the

bachelor sucked into himself like a sea-anemone which suddenly sees something wrong and falls into itself, and both like a half-knit flesh wound'. His isolation contrasts unfavourably with the companionship of Teresa and Quick.

The word 'companionship' is important. It is not accurate to say that Quick 'saves' Teresa, and one very rapid way to be convinced of this is to compare their situation with that of a couple who are unequivocally represented in these terms, such as Caro and Adam in Shirley Hazzard's *Transit of Venus*. In *For Love Alone*, Quick is less a determinant in Teresa's life than a fortunate circumstance which proves her capacities. He is the opportunity, but she must seize it to save herself. It is important that she is the first to say 'I love you', making towards him the positive move that she has never been able to make towards Jonathan at the crucial moment and in his actual presence. Granted that Jonathan has been playing a specially devious game of invitation and rebuffal, while Quick is unambiguously open to such a move, it is Teresa who must make it, and in so doing, abandon self-denial. Throughout the novel, she has been torn between rebellious pride and self-blame. Her misery after her first rejection by Jonathan (Chap. 29, *You Do Not Stand Anywhere*) is a classic portrait of female self-denigration. The theorist might point out how well-conditioned she has been by her father and brothers. But it is no mere stereotype; it bears very clearly Teresa's individualizing hallmarks: intellectual curiosity, physical resilience, and an underlying awareness of power rather than powerlessness. Although her judgement has been so confused that she embarks on a letter of apology to Jonathan, she is restrained from completing the letter by some stubborn fibre of selfhood. It is this which finally validates what must otherwise look like an extravagant flourish when we find this passage a few pages later:

'And so you are getting to know yourself?' Johnny said and to Teresa he appeared to be shifting ground. She said listlessly: 'Yes.'

'Know thyself, a difficult injunction. We don't always like what we find.'

'I do,' she said.

'Yes? And what do you find?'

'Don't ask me, you don't want to hear that, Johnny. I'm going to write a book about Miss Haviland.' (p.353)

For a very minor character, Miss Haviland has a good deal of importance. Later (p.426) she is to write to assure Teresa that there is no necessity for her to be destroyed by the discovery of Jonathan's charlatanism. The reader feels an invitation to share her attitude to Teresa: 'You interest me. Don't die. Live.' And it is Teresa's prospective novel,

changed into her notes on the Seven Houses, A System by which the Chaste can Know Love, that precipitates the crisis between Teresa and Quick.

If there remains an element of the mysterious in Teresa's capacity for salvation and in the arrangement of events to afford her the opportunity to exercise that capacity, then this is because of a view expressed by Stead in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* that 'the ranges of human experience go beyond human belief'.<sup>4</sup> Teresa will allow in it something of 'what is called fate' (p.458), but will think of her relationship with Quick as one involving neither dependence nor diminution.

Nor are we to think of it as terminal. Rather, Stead is at pains to present it as dynamic and complex, capable of creating problems as well as of solving them, and this causes a degree of raggedness in the conclusion of the novel.

A warning against the simplistic reduction of relationships has already been given in the case of that between Jonathan and Teresa. Aware perhaps of the possibility that it will be schematized as a study in sado-masochism, Stead short-circuits this response in the reader by allowing it to be voiced within the novel by a manifestly perverse witness, Jonathan himself (pp.359-60 and 442-3). His unreliability as witness is of course manifold. It is not only that he prefers ideas to flesh; his ideas are, as Quick perceives, not only nasty in themselves, and hypocritically at odds with his actions, but also full of unacknowledged confusions as ideas. It is the lack of acknowledgement that is heinous, not the confusion in itself. Indeed, it seems that Stead in presenting some of those hundred kinds of love wants to demonstrate that the confusions concerning love, lust, and marriage are real confusions, cases not of mere mistaken identity, but of identities overlapping and intertwining.<sup>5</sup> A notion of free love which means no more than that lust no longer requires legalizing is no complete answer because lust and legality do not constitute the whole story, nor do our feelings obligingly freeze at what looks like the achievement of well-being.

In following Teresa past the point of initial consummation of her love for Quick and showing that the effect of satisfaction is to free her appetite for other men, Stead is not merely striving to avoid the clichés of 'happily ever after', nor is she merely trying to *épater le bourgeois* by insisting upon her heroine's being in a condition which is perfectly plausible psychologically, but not conventionally admissible. It is not anti-romanticism either; rather a version of the romantic notion that major experiences expand the human horizon, not contract it, and that

growth continues in the exploration of these expansions. Teresa, Harry and Quick are not freed from problems by the absence of marriage contracts; they are obliged instead to struggle with a reality not pre-fabricated by institutionalized forms and responses. The balance they achieve is a rather sketchy and fortuitous one, relying as it does on the Spanish Civil War as a kind of *deus ex machina* to whisk Harry from the scene. In the final pages the art is less achieved than the content is interesting, especially in the extension of one of the sub-themes, that of truth, like love, one of the ideal values of western society.

Certainly Stead values truth. It is part of the sickness of Jonathan's soul that he is not merely hypocritical, but very actively and always self-aggrandizingly, deceitful, especially in his relationships with women.<sup>10</sup> Stead begins supplying the reader, but not Teresa, with unequivocal evidence of this shortly after Teresa's arrival in England. This increases our apprehensions on her behalf, especially if we remember that, in the early part of the novel, her passionate regard for truthfulness is such an established family fact that it is also a family joke to send her into a tantrum by a teasing accusation of lying. Teresa's idea of truth, like her idea of love, while fundamentally admirable, is somewhat naïve; the action of the novel requires her to think rather more deeply. When, at the end of Chap. 28, she detects Jonathan in a minor piece of lover's deceit, she does not react very fiercely, perhaps because the deceit flatters her mildly. What she does do, very characteristically, is to emerge shortly after with a speculative theory about lying in general (p.352).

Teresa's personal capacity to deal truthfully is tested in her relationship with Quick, and here she begins to suspect that lies may come from love, as well as from fear and weakness. It looks for a time as if she is to be condemned to playing the role of the happy woman for Quick, just as she was condemned to play the role of the unhappy woman for Jonathan: 'She thought that each day would be a step farther into the labyrinth of concealment and loving mendacity' (p.460). One needs to be very careful however in basing any final judgement on what any character 'thinks', especially under the stress of a particular situation. It is positively misleading for a critic to alter the verb to 'knows' and proceed with the rest of the passage as quotation, as is done by R.G. Geering.<sup>11</sup>

This passage needs to be placed against the later scene in which she and Quick are skirting nervously round the question of Teresa and Harry 'and then she felt she could not bear any ambiguities in their life' (p.500). It is, of course, largely because Quick is a man with whom she can risk telling the truth that she manages to dispel this one without disaster. The

reader may be more aware than she is that ambiguities will continue to form; but we are likely to be content to see the novel end with the balance on the positive side for Teresa, for truth and for love.

## NOTES

1. References throughout are to the edition published by Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1965.
2. The title is tonally ambiguous: the play of irony over its aspect of sentimental romanticism does not prevent the existence of another level, a serious one, of romanticism.
3. Its predecessors were *The Salzburg Tales* (1934), *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934), *The Beauties and the Furies* (1936), *House of All Nations* (1938), *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940).
4. Stead herself states this quite matter-of-factly: e.g. in the hearing of the present writer at a seminar at Monash University in 1976.
5. Cf. her classification under City Novels by H.M. Green in *A History of Australian Literature*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, rpt. & rev. 1962, Vol. 2, p.1007: If Christina Stead comes naturally under discussion here, because not only most of her settings, but also her characters, attitudes, method and manner generally are those of modernity and of the cities, it does not follow that she is comparable with any other city novelist.
6. Randall Jarrell, 'An Unread Book': Introduction to *The Man Who Loved Children*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, N.Y., 1961, p.xxviii.
7. Despite apparent inconsistency, such an attitude often co-exists with a residue of the notion of the heroic protagonist as divinely, or fatally, elected to certain roles and actions. So Teresa thinks 'involuntarily' that her life with Quick, if not fate, 'is what is called fate' (p.468).
8. *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, rpt. 1965, p.270.
9. On p.468 however the reader may well be not merely confused but positively misled into thinking that Teresa and Quick are legally married. The accumulation of terms — husband, marriage, connubial life, marital union — is too insistent to be accidental. Perhaps Stead is trying to claim for the essential union of the lovers those words usually reserved for unions conventionally sanctioned. If so, the reader, left without benefit of explanation, is unlikely to view as successful this attempt to force language to meet Teresa's complaint that it is not large enough (see *supra* p. ).
10. Consider pp.317-22 and p.334 versus p.342.
11. R.G. Geering, *Christina Stead, Writers & Their Work*, O.U.P., Melbourne, 1969, p.27.

# Doris Lessing

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## INTERVIEW

This interview took place on 23 June 1980 at Doris Lessing's London home. The interviewer is Michael Thorpe. I would like to thank the British Council and Yolande Camû in particular for permission to print this excerpt from the interview.

*Mrs Lessing, perhaps we may begin by speaking a little about the relationship between your early life in Southern Rhodesia, growing up on the veld, and what you describe as the gift of your solitary childhood. If I may relate you to your heroine, Martha Quest. In one of your early novels you describe 'the gift of her solitary childhood on the veld' as 'that knowledge of something painful and ecstatic, something central and fixed but flowing. A sense of movement, of separate things interacting and finally becoming one but greater. It was this which was her load-stone, even her conscience' I would like to ask you if you would perhaps expand a little upon the sense in which you use the word 'conscience' there, because I feel that this may not be altogether clear to many readers.*

Well, I think I'm using it in a sense that it is a feeling that you measure other things against. But it's very hard to describe, of course, because what I was describing in Martha Quest was that kind of ecstatic experience that many adolescents do in fact have. It's very common to adolescents, and I think perhaps it's overvalued.

*Is it a romantic ecstasy?*

Oh, I don't know if it's romantic, no, but it's extremely common. You'll find it described in a great deal of religious literature too. It's not an uncommon thing, but it is a reminder perhaps that life is not quite so black and white or cut and dried as we sometimes make it, and if you

have had this kind of thing happen to you then it's something to refer back to, if you are about to make things too over-simplified.

*May I ask you if this conscience is the individual conscience of which you speak in the essay A Small Personal Voice where you speak of the importance of dealing with the individual conscience in its relationship with the collective. Is that a different conscience?*

Well, I hadn't thought of relating them, I must say. In *A Small Personal Voice* I was preoccupied at that particular time — it was the mid-fifties — with how being a member of political parties or groups or collectives of various kinds can in fact pervert you and make you tell lies. Now this was something that not only I, but very, very many people were thinking about at that time, indeed all the people I knew at that time were thinking about it in one way or another. Some people in fact had suffered very deeply because of it. I lived in England, and I hadn't suffered, but people from Europe, from the communist countries, and from America, where the Cold War was something fairly savage, had done a lot of thinking, and that got into my essay because I was, and am, concerned at the way you can sell yourself out under pressure from other people. It's extremely easy to do, particularly when you think you are in the right about something. This is the essence of politics. You know that you are in the right. It's also the essence of religions which are right by definition. If I were to re-write this essay, I wouldn't perhaps put the emphasis now where I did then, but I still think that in a time when we are more and more institutionalized — because this is what is happening to us — more and more expected to be group people and members of collectives, it's extremely important for us to try and decide what we think, what I think as an individual. It's extremely hard to separate it, you know.

*The individual conscience, then, that you speak of in that essay is a moral conscience, and perhaps the conscience that you speak of in the novel referring to the ecstatic experience in childhood is a much deeper thing. But it seems to me that in your work the two are intimately related, that the sense in which we use the word 'conscience' is perhaps a highly spiritual one rather than what I suppose many readers would take to be a matter of political viewpoint or leaning or even the orthodox moral conscience.*

You see, I think one shouldn't get these two things confused because dealing with ordinary life, day to day life, in our relationships with



groups or institutions, I do not think one needs to use anything very high-flown or mystical. It seems to me that the problem there is rather different. It's a question of the conditioned conscience there, what has been conditioned into me by society, and what the individual conscience, as far as we can be aware of it, is saying. This problem of the conditioned conscience is one that isn't lightly pushed aside, just watch any child being brought up. From the moment this unfortunate being draws breath it is being told 'you are good', 'you are bad', 'what a good little baby you are' — all this goes on throughout every person's life and it's always a question of what is convenient for the parents or society because every child is some kind of wild animal that has to be tamed, otherwise no one can deal with it. It has to be, but there has to be a point where any one of us says all my 'you are good, you are bad' comes from society. Now that is the conditioned conscience which, I think, is our biggest prisoner. You see, when you are standing face to face with your group, which happens more and more in this rather unpleasant world of ours, then you have to decide what is speaking, is it 'you are a good little boy, you are a bad little boy', that you are brought up with, because the collective and institution always talks to the good little boy or the bad little boy or good little girl. That is the strength of institutions and politics and states and armies and the lot. They can go straight into your childhood conditioning 'Oh, he's such a good little boy, such a good little girl'. That is where they get us all the time. And now this other thing which is ... this other conscience, this sense of something much deeper is something you build on, particularly as a writer. It's something that you allow — I cook a lot — allow to simmer there, simmer quietly there, and cook so that you look at it from time to time and see what it's getting up to. I am of course talking about the unconscious.

*You have clarified an important point for me and I think it gets to the heart of one of the problems that I think you have felt in the reception of your work. You have been at some pains to stress for example that the African stories are not about the colour problem and that The Golden Notebook is not a trumpet, as you put it, for women's liberation. Also I think that perhaps your political affiliation to the Communist party for a very short time was a personal rather than an ideological matter. Would it be true, then, to infer that the reader is perhaps often too attached to the 'ism' for which he is looking so that he does not read your work necessarily in the spirit in which it was written.*

You see, all of these things are experiences I've been through, so they

find a place in my work. But, you know, there are about three questions you put into one there. About *The Golden Notebook*; the whole point of *The Golden Notebook* when I was writing it was the opposite of what it was taken to be. I had spent a lot of my time breaking things down into categories and classifying things and making either/ors and blacks and whites of everything. I'd come to realize that it was psychologically, psychically, an extremely dangerous thing to do and the people that I've known in my life who've done it have invariably broken down and cracked up, particularly in religion and politics. So the thesis of *The Golden Notebook* was the opposite of what it was taken to be. You know these thoughts that you suddenly have and you can't understand why you never had them before. It was one of those thoughts that prompted *The Golden Notebook*, the thought that there's something in the way our minds are set up, created or conditioned that makes us think of what divides people instead of what separates them. So we all of us all the time, if I say black and you say white, will instantly think of what divides the black and the white or divides men and women, and I have been trying ever since then to try not to do this and to try and see in fact what we have in common which is much more important.

*Your preoccupation, then, is with unity.*

Yes, I think it's very important. We've got to learn to think like this.

*When you spoke in the Preface to the second edition of The Golden Notebook of the necessity for a search for a world ethic, I take it that this is an aspect of that unity that you speak of.*

I talked about Marxism being an attempt at a kind of world ethic outside religion. Well, of course Marxism, as far as I am concerned, is a religion, it has all the same characteristics. But what Marxism at its best does is to look at the world as a whole and see the different parts of it interacting. That's how it is as a theory, not what happens to it when it's put into practice. And that is very appealing. I think, to young people particularly. Generation after generation falls in love with Marxism, and I think nearly always for the same reasons. It's because looking around at what we can all see, and it doesn't get any prettier, Marxism is presented ideologically as something that sees Man as a whole, and it takes some time, some experience to see that the theory and practice have got absolutely nothing to do with each other.

*The practice, then, for a humane novelist is to find a convincing alternative to this very appealing all-embracing ideology.*

I don't look for ideologies any more, oh no. What I do think is that the different classes of the world have got to start acting as a whole, or we are going to do ourselves in, politically, but that is not an ideological thought. It's a practical one.

*Were you inspired by certain writers?*

You must remember that I was stuck in a very provincial place with no one to talk to. I had no one at all to discuss anything with. When I say no one, I mean no one. I was reading quietly there by myself and I was reading the most extraordinary collection of writers. If I listed them your mind would split with amazement, like Proust for example, I'm quite sure that at that time I must have been one of the world experts on Proust. I also knew Tolstoy and Stendhal and so on. I can go on indefinitely, so of course I was influenced, but I do not know who I was influenced by particularly. I think I was influenced much more by a kind of largeness of attitude, which is what you find in 'great literature', which was the opposite of anything around me. This was Salisbury, Rhodesia, bigoted, narrow, colour-bar society where nothing was ever discussed excepting the colour bar, or sport, or gossip. Literature was my safety line, something to hold on to.

*I was struck by your comments about The Story of an African Farm. You speak of its obvious flaws, but then you speak of its quality as a work on the frontiers of experience which redeems whatever flaws it may have of structure and conception. I wonder if you would be kind enough to say a little more about what you had in mind with regard to the quality of that novel.*

Well, the least important part, I think, is the feminism which is, as it were, the intellectual motivation, I think. She was bitterly conscious of the position of women in the nineteenth century. (In passing I would like to say that if somebody wanted to condemn me to some vicious prison sentence they could condemn me to live as a woman in the nineteenth century. It must have been utter hell.) While she was fighting this particular battle all her life, and fighting it well, she was also preoccupied all the time with other things. There's a central place in that book

where this very clumsy, inarticulate farm boy, Waldo, talks to his stranger — you know they both have strangers. Lindell has her stranger who is a half sexual object and, I felt, perhaps not very important — but the real stranger is Waldo's stranger who talks to him of the meaning of life, and that is really the core of that book. It's not a subtle book any more than *Wuthering Heights* is. *Wuthering Heights* is an appalling novel. Have you ever sat down to analyse it? It's dreadful, but it doesn't really matter, does it? And I think the same is true of *An African Farm*, because if you wanted to pull *An African Farm* to bits, you could do a very good job of it. But it's redeemed because of the spirit of the book. All the time she's trying to come to terms with what life is all about. This is what her writing is really about.

*I would like to ask a few questions about The Grass is Singing. How did this novel evolve? I have read that you originally intended to centre it upon the figure of Marston.*

It was originally two thirds as long again. What happened was I wrote — based on a little newspaper I'd kept... and I'd kept that because of gossip I'd heard as a child about a woman, a farmer on some near farm, and her relations with a cook boy and the unease of the white people discussing it. Now it was not suggested that this was a straightforward sexual thing. What was suggested was that she was asking for it, with comments like my father's: 'There was a French queen who used to dress, and undress in front of her servants because they were not people to her.' That stuck in my mind. I gave up my job as a typist because I said to myself, 'You are always saying you are a writer, but where's the evidence?' I was then faced with writing a novel, and what was it going to be about? A third was the existing novel. There was also a great mass which was social satire and it couldn't possibly have been any good because I had then hardly been out of Rhodesia, and you have to have some kind of comparisons to make satire. So I just ripped off this two-thirds. The original plot was that this young Englishman, full of idealism — they were always turning up in Rhodesia, they never lasted for one reason or another longer than about a year — this idealistic young Englishman turned up and actually was confronted with this extremely basic, sordid and, above all, enigmatic incident because no one would tell the truth about it, nor bring it out in the open. When discussing this incident, the white farmers and the white farmers' wives on their verandas never said anything like 'We can't have a black man screwing a white woman' or anything like that, or 'How immoral!' It was always

ambiguous and wrapped up. This is what struck me as a child, and this is what that novel came out of.

*It has always seemed to me that your treatment of Mary Turner and of Dick Turner is a compassionate one; that you satirized the extreme figures, but not the central figures.*

I hadn't satirized Mary Turner and Dick Turner at all. No, I satirized the whole of the white community, using Marston as a focus. The satirical part of the book had nothing to do with the Turners. What I had to change was Marston.

*May I ask you if the second epigraph which you put at the front of the novel is invented?*

You know, that I couldn't remember. The thing was I'd written it in a notebook and I hadn't got an attribution and I didn't know whether I'd invented it or whether I'd read it, so I put 'anonymous'.

*But it is of course very apt not only for this novel but for many of the stories that you have written. It seems that in so many of your African stories, as in The Grass is Singing, your imagination is moved by the spectacle not of brutality or insensitivity, but of muddling incapacity to cope. Is this simply an instinctive, intuitive way of dealing with it, or is it really a deliberate looking back?*

Well, now I can intellectualize it and say I think that this is how most people are, but I suppose it must have been my experience. I was running through stories in my mind as you spoke, trying to think which fitted this description.

*One thinks of another woman, like Mrs Gale for example, the way in which she is treated when she confronts the young girl who is full of ecstasy and passion.*

No, that was when I was trying to contrast the English and the Afrikaners, that English kind of cold upper-class thing and the Afrikaners who are very simple and direct.

*But there is still, it seems to me, in your treatment of the cold and upper-class a sense of the pathos of this crippled sensibility.*

Oh, yes. Well, Mrs Gale is a woman in prison; all of them are, aren't they?

*Yes, indeed. The figure in The Grass is Singing, I suppose, who attracts the most comment is the figure of Moses, the boy, the African servant. Did you see him not so much as an individual as the essence of the African as the white sees him and fears him?*

With the anonymity I tried to sum up how the white people would see someone like this because they wouldn't see him very much as an individual at all. If I had made Moses a very particularized individual, that would have thrown that novel completely out, it would have been a different novel. Supposing I re-wrote it from his point of view. For a start, I don't think I'd be able to do it, which is another thing.

*Yes. In the long story 'Hunger' you did in fact do this, didn't you, and you did feel dissatisfied with it.*

I felt dissatisfied with it because it was too over-simplified. The thing is I wrote *The Grass is Singing* in Rhodesia as a white person and my contact with the blacks as equals was just non-existent. It was always either as an employer or as a rather patronizing person, simply because that was how you were situated. You couldn't have a really equal relationship with a black person. We did have a kind of political relationship, but they were not equal. If you are meeting black people who have to be home at nine o'clock to beat the curfew while you sit around in the office when they've gone and you can go off to a restaurant which they can't go to, no amount of ideology is going to turn this into an equal relationship, it's just not possible. I'd had no equal relationships with black people. By the time I'd come to write 'Hunger' I'd lived in England for quite a long time and I'd known a great many Africans and Jamaicans, and so on, as people. I no longer thought in terms of colour. I remember once how I realized that I really was on my way to being cured from colour feeling when an Indian turned up in my flat unannounced and asked me to do something. I disliked him as a person and I said 'Get out' and I thought 'My God, I'm cured' because it never crossed my mind that I mustn't be unkind to a dark-skinned person.

*When you embarked on The Grass is Singing, and in fact on all your African writing, did you have any previous writers about Africa in mind at all? Did you feel this has been done and it must be done differently by*

me? Did you have a sense of relationship to those who'd gone before you, or did you feel completely alone as it were in treating this?

You mean with *The Grass is Singing*? No, I didn't have anything to take it from at all. No, I didn't.

MICHAEL CHAPMAN

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## Douglas Livingstone — Poet

Douglas Livingstone is rightly regarded by many critics as the leading poet now writing in South Africa. Yet, South Africa has been slow to recognize his poetic talent. (The first critical study of his work, *Douglas Livingstone: A Critical Study of his Poetry*, was published by Ad. Donker, Johannesburg, in 1981.) In spite of his being honoured with a D. Litt. from the University of Natal (Durban) in 1982, his poetry has been more favourably received in England and America than in his own country. He has won international awards from the British Society of Authors and at the Cheltenham Festival, yet in South Africa his only poetry prize has been in a competition which he entered anonymously. His latest collection, *The Arriv's Undertone* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1978), has been well received abroad: the *London Magazine*, commenting on Livingstone's 'powerful evocation of a doomed South African dreamland', concludes that there is 'no better poet writing on this continent in any language'.<sup>1</sup> But this collection, which (to quote Richard Rive) 'must appeal to any serious student of South African literature',<sup>2</sup> was almost totally ignored by reviewers in South African literary magazines.

It is argued that Livingstone is not a 'political' writer, and that in a politically turbulent society, the writer who matters must be overtly political. Certainly, it is both inevitable and justifiable that a good deal of writing from South Africa should protest in a vigorous and direct way.

But reductive theories can so easily simplify the relationship between art and historical pressures, while denying the individuality of the artist. Livingstone's poetry, though it rarely offers a one-to-one relationship between art and topical events, nevertheless embodies the rigorous stresses of cultural transition, particularly in southern Africa. His methods of indirection ensure that his work is refreshingly free of both genteel anguishings and the limited jargon of the public platform, those recurrent weaknesses of South African literature since Pringle. Livingstone captures individual experience and the temper of his times in boldly imaginative ways — by his unmistakable newness of tone, rhythm and imagery. *The Times Literary Supplement* has commented that he brings southern Africa 'dangerously and aptly alive'.<sup>2</sup> This is true; yet it is also true that he transcends the region. As I shall show, his subject is not 'Africa' in a narrow sense, but contemporary man.

Douglas Livingstone was born of Scottish parents in Kuala Lumpur, Malaya, in 1932. At the age of ten he experienced at first hand the Japanese invasion. He recalls: 'We moved down the country in fits and starts machine-gunned and bombed in transit.'<sup>3</sup> And, after his father had been taken prisoner-of-war, he left Malaya with his mother and elder sister for Ceylon, and then the South Coast of Natal in South Africa. After completing his schooling in 1951, he moved to what was then Rhodesia where he trained as a bacteriologist, worked for a time in Zambia, and then in 1964 returned to South Africa to take charge of marine bacteriological research for a water-research institute in Durban. Often asked about the apparent paradox that he is a scientist who is also a poet, Livingstone has replied: 'Science is man's search for truth; poetry combines a search and an interpretation.'<sup>4</sup> He regards poetry as the minority art form, and sees it as constituting a greater challenge:

You have to get down to the truth, connect the truth in *oneself* with one's pen. It is very difficult to say exactly what you want to say, and you have to stay with it. It is a skill you have to keep on working at.<sup>5</sup>

Livingstone has so far published five books of poems and two award-winning radio plays. His first collection, *The Skull in the Mud* (London: Outposts Publications, 1960), is juvenilia; and Livingstone tells how, after realizing 'the appalling nature' of the twelve short poems that comprise the collection, he spent £25 buying up most of the available copies, which he destroyed.<sup>6</sup> His next collection, *Sjambok, and other poems from Africa* (London: O.U.P., 1964), is significant in any discussion of a South African poetic tradition. Partly, it is significant because, for the first time since Roy Campbell in the 1920s, South



African English poetry hears the thrill of poetic utterance; the poems have that element of surprise so essential to poetry. Like Campbell, Livingstone is able to vivify language, to present the familiar in its unusual aspects. Here is his 'Vulture':

Slack neck with the pecked  
skin thinly shaking, he  
sidles aside, then strumps  
his deliberate banker's  
gait to the stinking meal.

Or, here is his 'She-Jackal':

Evilly panting and smiling, a jackal  
stood near: razor ribs, wary shrivelled dogs,  
hourglass hips and lean wire legs quivering,  
the plump feeding ticks studding her bare flanks.

Livingstone's animals are a long way from the creatures to which we have grown accustomed. His animal poems, which comment obliquely on man in a tough, disillusioned landscape, have established him (together with Lawrence and Hughes) as a poet who has forcefully re-imagined animal life in ways relevant to a 20th-century world.

It is in fact Livingstone's ability to re-imagine motifs, situations, and particularly traditional segments of southern African experience, into original fictive forms that ultimately accounts for Sjambok's importance in South African poetry. While it is true that Campbell and Livingstone have in common an ability to activate language, the two poets have very different sensibilities. With Campbell we inhabit a heroic world which has not yet experienced the fragmentation of the Renaissance ideal; Livingstone, on the other hand, gives South African poetry a voice that is thoroughly and naturally modern.

This shift of sensibility is evident when we compare the two poets' respective responses to a particular motif in South African literature: that of Adamastor, the anthropomorphic spirit of the Cape of Storms, who first appears in Camoens's Portuguese Renaissance epic, *The Lusids*. In Camoens's poem Vasco da Gama, the epic hero, outwits Adamastor, who is depicted as a gauche African cousin of the sophisticated Renaissance Europeans. Campbell, three hundred years later, resurrects Adamastor from the rocky escarpment of the Cape. Reacting against a late 19th-century South African 'tradition' of 'veld and vlei' verse (that is, sentimental hymns to the mystery of the veld), Campbell was attracted to Camoens's Renaissance flamboyance, and in Adamastor

he found a ready-made poetic symbol. Ignoring Adamastor's gaucherie, Campbell injects this ponderous giant with heroic vitality, depicting him as the Nemesis of the South African philistinism and stupidity which had refused to recognize Campbell's own robust poetic talents. 'Rounding the Cape' opens majestically:

The low sun whitens on the flying squalls,  
Against the cliffs the long grey surge is rolled  
Where Adamastor from his marble halls  
Threatens the sons of Lulus as of old...

Livingstone — reacting specifically against Campbell — transforms Adamastor into a characteristically modern figure, terrifying in his very banality. In the poem 'Adamastor Resuscitated', Adamastor is a ludicrous figure of retribution who, preoccupied with an unsuccessful love affair, is allowed to sink ignominiously back into the scrub of the South African veld. Whereas Campbell's is a world in which Time's progression is marked by the tides that roll majestically to shore, Livingstone's Adamastor inhabits a universe in which Time is a '.38 repeater':

Memories of an atomic club dotting him one,  
wrenched to be whirled from some pre-Nordic Yggdraal —  
if Time's a .38 repeater — he was done!  
no rifling of his guns by knives impure,  
self-consumption would be slower and more sure

The old and the new are violently juxtaposed; chronological order seems to have gone awry. The celebrated question of Pinter's that summarizes the absurdist element in life is relevant: what's one thing got to do with another?

The motif of Adamastor is also used by both Campbell and Livingstone to depict their respective South African Adams, the white man's archetypal new world hero. As in American and Australian poetry, the South African Adam (as befits a frontier society) is a hunter. In Campbell's poetry he is an individual standing alone, self-reliant and ready to confront whatever awaits him; in Livingstone's work he has been transformed into an Adam-after-the-Fall.

Campbell, for example, sets his new world hero in a highly romantic hunter's paradise (as innocent in its way as the 19th-century pastoral idyll against which he had reacted). In 'To a Pet Cobra' the exceptional outdoor man (that is, Campbell himself) and nature share a magnificent and ruthless power:

Such venom give my hilted fangs the power,  
Like drilling roots the dirty soil that spike,  
To sting these rotted wastes into a flower.

Livingstone presents neither a pastoral idyll nor a hunter's paradise, but a disenchanted African landscape in which Campbell's 'solar colours' (his 'scarlet flowers' and 'golden rays') have faded to tawny yellows and greens. In 'The Killers' Livingstone's white hunter of the 1960s has been domesticated; a packed lunch and a supply of beer are now essential to the success of any outdoor venture:

You know how it is — fishing — your bare feet  
in the warm mush of dead leaves near the edge  
of the water, back against mossed tree bark  
beer cooling in the river, and a wedge  
of sandwich, wondering when to eat.

The colloquial idiom establishes the unheroic tone, while the high proportion of monosyllabic words captures the clipped South African manner of speaking. Like Campbell's Adam, Livingstone's Adam-after-the-Fall also confronts the primordial energies of the snake. But there is no synthesis. His actions are swift, barely rational; his limited sensibility (that curse of the South African situation) is revealed in a crisis:

I got the shotgun and blew her head clean  
...I had to shoot; I mean  
that now her limp grey life lies understood.

In *Sjambok*, then, Livingstone parodies what has been referred to as the South African justificatory myth of pastoralism and the virtue of innocence: that is, the tendency of successive generations of South African writers to romanticize pre-industrialism. His modern sensibility recognizes that pastoral themes need to be re-imagined, if they are to have relevance to a world in which it becomes increasingly difficult to return to nature.

Livingstone's modernity, of course, implies more than a chronological description; it is a matter of art and technique, a peculiar twist of vision — a vision which (as I have suggested) embodies a sharp awareness of the stresses of personal and cultural dissociation. The toughness and self-contradictoriness of human experience seem to defy traditional philosophical and moral systems; while science, instead of underpinning the poet's world-view with rationalistic assurances, has undergone a

modernist phase of its own, its once solid premises subverted by such concepts as relativity and indeterminacy. Livingstone's poetry exists in the tension of romantic and scientific attitudes. On the one hand, there is an element of bold experimentalism, indicating a desire to explore experience in daring ways; on the other, there is an equally strong appreciation of traditional form, implying the necessity of coping with a deeply felt, often distressing, subject.

The poetic techniques employed have certain affinities with American modernist techniques. Livingstone's rhythms are colloquial; the image is hard, exact, a description of spatial form; the impact of the poetry is instantaneous, not discursive; the syntax is the grammar of poetry, not of prose. Like T.S. Eliot and more recently Robert Lowell, Livingstone tends to translate his inner torment into a struggle with language. Eliot has spoken of fragments shored up against his ruin; Livingstone has said something similar about his own poetic practice:

Perhaps artistic responsibility is to get to know the nameless incubus within and deliver it with form and shape.... to rid oneself of a maybe dangerous violence by writing it out — to tame oneself as it were ... A poem is an artefact, a constructed thing.

Modernism makes its impact on Livingstone not superficially as an aesthetic theory (although he is obviously influenced by early 20th-century innovators); rather, his modernist strategies are dictated fundamentally by his own perceptions of psychological and historical discontinuity. In the poem 'Isacariot', for example, the Judas motif is wrenched into service of a sceptical 20th century world. Much that is modern has entered Judas's feelings. His imagination has been dissected by 'splitting reason', and, unable to appreciate the nature of Christ's sacrifice, he is left alienated and alone. It is not Livingstone's purpose to show Judas's eventual suicide. Instead, the poem celebrates a terrible courage, which manifests itself in Judas's determination to exist in a universe that offers him no consolation:

I'll choose Earth as my rack.  
Last; for prayer: my lips will spit a tense  
goddam — those oddly flat and nailing vowels.

This idea of existential struggle recurs in Livingstone's poetry and constitutes a positive principle in a world in which human and spiritual values seem fractured.

Moreover, Livingstone's extraordinary artistic vitality — his creation

of striking fictions — in itself attests to an affirmation of life. In 'Storm-shelter', for instance, the poet evokes on the immediate level an African storm, but an initial reading already alerts one to descriptions of peculiar power. Images flash past the eye, while alliteratively awkward words elicit from the reader muscular participation. One is drawn both mentally and physically into a strange world, where the elements of the African bush emerge as symbols of violence and existential struggle:

Under the baobab tree, treaded  
death, stroked in by the musty case,  
scratches silver on fleshy earth.  
Threaded flame has unstitched and wandered  
hollow thickets of bearded branches  
blanched by a milk-wired ivy. Choleric  
thunder staggers raging overhead.

'Choleric thunder' — this last psychologically-orientated image introduces the human drama. A lone figure attempts to find relief from the clash of elements that mirrors his torment. From the eye of the storm we hear a very human voice — a person like ourselves, who is painfully aware that the old sayings, the trusted systems, cannot account for his utter isolation:

'Never stand under trees in a storm.'  
Old saws have an ancient rhythm  
in them; but these dry, far from bold  
norms and maxims are scalpel severed  
by the sharp, needle-thin lightning,  
frightening reason behind the eye,  
diverged into lank abstract forms.

Here is the central paradox of Livingstone's vision: a striving for order, for 'reason', and the recognition that it may be inadequate to account for the instinctual side of man's psyche — the painful awareness that synthesis of man and Nature may be destined to remain illusory. It is the dilemma of imaginative man under the dispensation of science. For modern man, stripped of his 'old saws' and their 'ancient rhythms', there remains but the determination to survive. Although 'steel spears ... rattle their points ... maiming invisibly', and 'shafts reel/ through the streaked Impi from Nowhere',

There is only one thing to do —  
wheel, stamping, into that brittle rain.

Such a commitment to bare survival could be extremely bleak; yet, 'Stormshelter' has considerable vibrancy. Finally, this poem insists unexpectedly on yet a further dimension of meaning: its linguistic dexterity is, in itself, a kind of celebration of the 'poetic' view of experience; even as we read of an inability to create, we participate in an act of imaginative enlargement. As Frank Kermode has said: 'Fictions are especially necessary in the modern world ... They enable man to confer organization and form on the temporal structure, and they grow very intricate because we know so desolately that as and is are not really one.'<sup>3</sup>

The character of Livingstone's poetry is in marked contrast to the character of black South African poetry of the last decade. Broadly speaking, Soweto poetry cultivates immediacy; Livingstone, on the other hand, attempts to cultivate more than immediacy, to embody language in a situation larger than the present. His variety of styles, his use of personae, and his critical re-imaginings of the past are means of overcoming the problem of a wider communication in a world that seems to have lost faith in traditional terms of reference.

Yet, Livingstone and a Soweto poet such as Oswald Mtshali are linked in interesting ways. 1970 saw the publication of Livingstone's next important collection, *Eyes Closed Against the Sun* (O.U.P., London), and, soon afterwards, Mtshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, both books containing predominantly urban poems. Although William Plomer, in the 1920s, had looked briefly at a tawdry Rand townscape, South African poets prior to 1970 had generally favoured the veld to the town as a source of imagery. Livingstone's and Mtshali's collections signal the beginning of an increasing urbanization of South African English poetry, and it is indicative of the South African racial situation that the two poets present not only very different visions of urban life, but also two 'cities' which are mutually exclusive.

Livingstone, who in the interim had settled in Durban, concentrates on the white inhabitants — the whores, hoboes and lonely flat dwellers — of a big seaport; his black man is superficially drawn. Mtshali, for his part, presents unimaginative caricatures of whites, yet offers a memorable gallery of township types. Neither poet attempts to face the difficult challenge of a racially diverse environment. In his latest collection (*The Anvil's Undertone*), however, Livingstone does successfully evoke an urban landscape in which blacks, whites and Indians emerge as credible human beings, but in *Eyes Closed Against the Sun* he ignores urban racial tensions. In fact, he at times seems more interested in matters of technique than in the problems of his city inhabitants, and there are a number of sketches of urban observation which, while vivid

and celebratory of artistic individuation, are distinctly limited in their weight of experience.

But the more significant poems are acutely preoccupied with the human situation, and — as is the case with Soweto poetry too — life is pictured as a struggle. For Mshali, life is a struggle in community, with survival related directly to subsistence living and oppressive laws. Livingstone, operating from within the parameters of white urban society, presents private modes of experience. In 'Did', for instance, the struggle to exist involves the anxieties of city loneliness:

Did, after overtopping the waiter,  
leave his name, his phone-number  
on a bar-chit, and grairly  
under these, the single word *lonely*.  
A girl called him selling service  
before the street lamps could flower,  
and he went round with ice,  
a hostile and did drink, listening to her  
icebreaking chatter, her teeth  
meeting like tongs in small pains,  
did watch her acquisitive  
nose with its sadly desperate quiver.

Isolation, the inability to find relationship, is the common experience of Livingstone's city dwellers. Yet, while ugliness is not shirked, the void in *Eyes Closed Against the Sun* is not as dark as it was in *Sjambok*. Perhaps during these years life in Durban seemed somewhat kinder to the poet than it had in Rhodesia. Whatever the reason, Livingstone extends his emotional range. Gentleness, compassion, humour (qualities which in the earlier collection were choked by the coarse growth of the African bush) largely account for the success of poems such as the much anthologized 'Gentling a Wildcat', 'To a Chinese Lady' and 'Steel Giraffes'. In the tender lyric, 'Steel Giraffes', the poet is in love, and the 'unromantic' South African industrial townscape seems transformed. The Durban skyline, perhaps even the African animal world beyond, tactfully acknowledges the wonder of human affection:

There are, probably, somewhere  
arms as petal-slight as hers;  
there are probably somewhere,  
wrists as slim:  
quite probably, someone has  
hands as slender-leaved as hers,  
the fingers, probably  
bare of rings, as thin.

Certainly, there is nowhere  
such a colour  
of funnels, mastings, yards,  
filaments of dusk ringing shrouds  
woven through the word goodbye,  
riveted steel graffiti  
tactfully looking elsewhere,  
necks very still to the sky.

'Steel Giraffes' was reprinted in Livingstone's next collection, *A Rosary of Bone* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1975). This slim volume is unique in South African poetry for its intelligent, adult treatment of sexual love. The poet's stylistic versatility is evident in poems of celebration, loss, humour and ribaldry. His models are the 17th-century love poems of Donne and Marvell; but Livingstone exploits, to his own purpose, the Metaphysical tactics of scientific allusion, paradox, pun and hilarious comparison. Whereas Donne, in 'Love's Progress', wittily compares sexual conquest to a voyage of exploration through the waters of the northern hemisphere, Livingstone's early European navigator, Sir Tongue, charts southern zones:

I adjure thee, Sir Tongue: Be Firm. Be Indiscrete,  
Cast off. Your journey start from her slightest Toes.  
Set Sail upon the Cream of her Feet.

...

Down over Chin & Throat to Armpits you'll be sent,  
& up those Sun-Tipped Capes from whence a Country-View  
Spreads below. Coast down to her soft Belly's Dent.

Here, you may pause to ease your Rig and Sails  
Cruise in widening Circles until intervenes  
That Continent's sweet Harbour from the South-West Gales.

Drop Anchor in this most redolent of Coves,  
& taste for yourself Nectarines, Tangerines,  
Pineapples, Grapes, Avocadoes, Paw Paws, Cloves.

(*'Giovanni Jacopo Meditates: on an early European Navigator'*)

This is an amusing variation of the archetypal Cape journey, which has provided an organizing metaphor for successive South African writers. As the poet Robert Dederick said at the time: 'Livingstone has added a dash of colour to the prevailing grey earnestness of the contemporary poetical scene.'<sup>11</sup>



*A Rosary of Bone* does not so much examine the nature of human relations as new ways of expressing the emotion of love. The poems offer a dramatic expression of the outward, demonstrative aspects of feeling. There is scepticism, affirmation, raciness, and underlying seriousness that is never solemn. The poet discovers that love may offer man moments of synthesis, its failure leads to isolation and despair.

In Livingstone's latest collection, *The Ansel's Undertone*, the mood has darkened considerably. Human relations have failed, or been cut short by death, while the increasing urgency of the South African socio-political situation over the last decade has influenced the overall tone. The poetry shows continuing stylistic evolution to accommodate the shift towards a greater intransigence. At times, the diction is austere; at other times, the search for new images — for new fictive worlds — takes one into areas of 20th-century scientific pursuit, witchcraft and nightmare. As in *Sjambok*, there is a turning outwards to the realized events, the symbolic images, of southern African society.

We journey to KwaZulu — underdeveloped, poverty-stricken — where

Umuhesi trees hold  
up wasp-waisted ribcages bare but for  
rags of bloodstained flowers...

(*August Zulu*)

to the undeserved luxury of white suburbia, where the Town Tembu

does the two cars, the garden,  
the floors, the windows, the swimming pool.  
There are many empty bottles and full  
ashtrays...

(*Town Tembu*)

to a contrasting Durban townscape, where Peter Govender, busdriver  
and fisherman, discovers that contempt for death is his only freedom:

Sometime busdriver  
of *Shiva's Pride*, *The Off Course Tale*,  
*The Venus Trap* and *The Khyber Pass Express*

Old duels for fares:  
The South Coast road — all we could get,  
my left hand coming the wheel...

(*Sonatina of Peter Govender, Beached*)

to a village blacksmith shop, caught in the colours of the mind:

Horseshoes, blades, shares and lives all shaped  
to the hoarse roar and crack of flame,  
by the clang of metallic chords,  
hammer-song, the anvil's undertone,  
nailed to one post of jackal's skull.

(Mpondo's *Smoky, Translated*)

*The Anvil's Undertone* represents a forceful distillation of individual and social pressures, upon which Livingstone has imposed his distinctive signature. In a world in which bush massacres and gruesome deaths in detention have almost become the common experience, he seems to say that absurdity, nightmare, is the present-day South African reality. Thus, the animal motif begins to assume hallucinatory shapes. In 'Under Capricorn' an African goat rises from a roadcutting, a frightening manifestation of man's shadow world:

Feared, fornicatory  
hairy flanks taut-tight; yellow  
mad intelligent eyes bright  
under quick horns...

What is particularly interesting, though, is the way in which Livingstone has adapted the animal motif to reflect the haunted imagination of the urban man. In 'The Zoo Affair' the white hunter, who a decade earlier had taken his packed sandwiches to the bush, has now donned his city suit. Experiencing a new urban alienation, he is fascinated by a tiger in the city zoo, and one night enters its cage:

For perhaps one second he felt it, face buried in rank  
cat's fur: the sleepy response. Then the rasped purr  
meshed with metallic springs. The harrelling flanks  
pumped an outraged blast from alien vaults of power.

They found him on the floor early next morning, his head  
a split and viscid watermelon; loosely the wet tufts  
of combed brains spilled, his smile quiet through the red;  
beside him, for warmth, the cosy sprawl of his love,

The powerful, often gruesome, imagery evokes a scene of indiscriminate destruction. The urban man expresses his humanity, his desire for a passion, in a bizarre way, which only seems to suggest the full extent of his isolation.

Finally, Livingstone has accepted, in his own way, the recent challenge of Soweto poetry's 'open' or 'naked' forms. In 'Dust' he achieves an idiom which is hard, keenly-edged like metal, and perfectly equipped to express a vision of existence that has become implacable. The South African townscape is a battleground; a white man finds the corpse of a black labourer in the gutter:

The bundle in the gutter had its skull  
cracked open by a klerie.  
The blunt end of a sharpened bicycle  
spoke grew a solitary  
silver war-plume from the nape of his neck.  
I turned him gently. He'd thinned to a wreck

It was my friend Mketwa. He was dead.  
Young Mac the Knife, I'd called him,  
without much originality. Red  
oiled where they'd overhauled him.  
An illegal five-inch switchblade, his 'best'  
possession, was stuck sideways in his chest.

This deeply-felt incident convinces the reader that Mketwa's life and death are tragic — a waste of human potential. Herein lies the real indictment of a restrictive social system.

Livingstone, then, creates the dramatic event which is set solidly in its background; there is economy and coherence in his projection of a variety of subject-matter. As is probably inevitable in a boldly adventurous poet, his experimental verve does at times overreach itself; at other times, a self-conscious aesthetic formalism militates against deeper insights into the human condition. In his best poetry, however, the relationship between human and aesthetic components is complex and dynamic. *The Ansel's Undertone* is deeply committed to southern Africa, yet it is successful at suggesting, too, that peculiarly regional anxieties have their echoes and counterparts elsewhere.

Refreshingly — particularly in the context of South African literature — Livingstone does not offer moral prescriptions. What he does is to write with compassion and originality about aspects of being alive in difficult times. In a world of total economics and politics — distrustful of the autonomous imagination — Livingstone has attempted to modify his reader's sensibility by affirming the value of the imaginative life.

# NOTES

1. *London Magazine*, 18 (8), November 1978, 61.
2. Talking of Books, English Programme, S.A.B.C., 25 May 1978.
3. 19 November 1964
4. 'Leaving School', *London Magazine*, 6 (7), October 1966, 55
5. 'Douglas Livingstone, Poet', *The Daily News* (Durban), 7 January 1978
6. *Ibid*
7. Letter to the author, 21 March 1978
8. 'Ten Comments on a Questionnaire', *London Magazine*, 4 (8), November 1964, 33.
9. *The Sense of an Ending*, New York, 1967, 40
10. Talking of Books, 10 October 1973.



Douglas Livingstone. Photo: Monica Fairhall

# Douglas Livingstone

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## LAKE MORNING IN AUTUMN

Before sunrise the stork was there  
resting the pillow of his body  
on stick legs growing from the water.

A flickering gust of pencil-slanted rain  
swept over the chill autumn morning;  
and he, too tired to arrange

his wind-buffered plumage,  
perched swaying a little  
neck flattened, ruminative,

beak on chest, contemplative eye  
filmy with star vistas and hollow  
black migratory leagues, strangely,

ponderously alone and some weeks  
early. The dawn struck and everything,  
sky, water, bird, reeds

was blood and gold. He sighed.  
Stretching his wings he clubbed  
the air, slowly, regally, so very tired,

aiming his beak he carefully climbed  
inclining to his invisible tunnel of sky,  
his feet trailing a long, long time.

## GENTLING A WILDCAT

Not much wild life, roared Mine leonine Host  
from the fringe of a forest of crackles  
round an old dome-headed steam radio,  
between hotel and river — a mile of bush —  
except for the wildcats and jackals.

And he, of these parts for years, was right.  
That evening I ventured with no trepidations  
and a torch, towed by the faculty  
I cannot understand, that has got me  
into too many situations.

Under a tree, in filtered moonlight,  
a ragged heap of dusty leaves stopped moving.  
A cat lay there, open from chin to loins;  
lower viscera missing; truncated tubes  
and bitten-off things protruding.

Little blood there was, but a mess of  
damaged lungs; straining to hold its breath  
for quiet; claws fixed curved and jutting,  
jammed open in a stench of jackal meat;  
it tried to raise its head hating the mystery, death.

The big spade-skull with its lynx-fat cheeks  
aggressive still, raging eyes hooked in me, game;  
nostrils pulling at a tight mask of anger  
and fear; then I remembered hearing  
they are quite impossible to tame.

Closely, in a bowl of unmoving roots,  
an untouched carcass, unlicked, swaddled and wrapped  
in trappings of birth, the first of a litter stretched.  
Rooted out in mid-confinement: a time  
when jackals have courage enough for a wildcat.

In some things too, I am a coward,  
and could not here punch down with braced thumb,  
lift the nullifying stone or stiff-edged hand  
to axe with mercy the nape of her spine.  
Besides, I convinced myself, she was numb.

And oppressively, something felt wrong:  
not her approaching melting with earth,  
but in lifetimes of claws, kaleidoscopes:  
moon-claws, sun-claws, teeth after death,  
certainly both at mating and birth.

So I sat and gentled her with my hand,  
not moving much but saying things, using my voice;  
and she became gentle, affording herself  
the influent luxury of breathing —  
unrammelled, bubbly, safe in its noise.

Later, calmed, despite her tides of pain,  
she let me ease her claws, the ends of the battle,  
pulling off the trapped and rancid flesh.  
Her miniature limbs of iron relaxed.  
She died with hardly a rattle.

I placed her peaceful ungrinning corpse  
and that of her firstborn in the topgallants  
of a young tree, out of ground reach, to grow: restart  
a cycle of maybe something more pastoral  
commencing with beetles, then maggots, then ants.

## Portrait of a Memsahib

Our supreme lady, Memsahib Freda, was what you could call a good-natured, kind-hearted soul, that is, if you chose to believe the stories that all who remember her would tell you.

They would tell you many things.

They would tell you, for instance, that when Memsahib smiled, as she so often did, you could hardly see the eyes for the wrinkles. So purely, like a baby, would she smile that you would nervously glance behind you to make sure that it was really at you that the smile was directed. Her face, they would tell you, would just crumble into a million lines that rushed in to seize her little face from all directions, making it look like the hide of some little animal, that somebody had folded and put aside to be thrown away sometime.

Nobody seems to have ever seen her young. But most of the time Memsahib seemed quite cheerful, as cheerful as a small girl whose greatest desire in life is to be friends with the whole world, even despite her old age and her apparent loneliness. What had happened to her husband, only she herself seemed to know. But it was something she was not telling anybody and over which she did not show much distress; her contentment in the face of a lack of a husband seemed especially intended as a lesson to women, that denying one a husband was the least of the punishments a god could deal a woman.

Memsahib Freda lived atop a little hill in a big big shining house surrounded by a fence tall as the sky, cool shades and the greenest lawn you ever saw, all by herself, with her dog, if you had the kind of humour, that is, to regard as a companion a senile, toothless dog the size of a calf.

As for her coffee farm, it spread for miles and miles, but it was said this was merely the little finger of a vast fortune she controlled. Since she was white, however, nobody bothered to speculate, as would have been the case otherwise, on the source of her astonishing rumoured wealth, or even how she came to deserve so much from her god.

You would be told that our distinguished white lady usually drove around in a big dragon of a car, the kind that you could not find



anywhere these days. She would be swallowed up in the car, so completely that the only indication you were given that the car was not being driven around by some invisible spirit, was the milk-white tip of Memsahib's hair as her head bobbed up and down with the car on the bumps. The children, seeing her coming, would dance up and down, driven by some wild devil in their blood, and they would scream at the top of their voices: *Mamsa Pirida! Mamsa Pirida!* (that being what we called the dear old lady, her real name being somewhat difficult for the tongue and the lips to grab hold of if you had not been to school).

This was the only time anybody dared call our supreme, white lady by the name, loudly, forgetting oneself. Otherwise nobody, including the children, was bold enough to put forth any sign of familiarity with the old lady. It was only when she was in such metallic motion with all of her whiteness, except the tip of her gray head, swallowed up in the big car, that the children came forward to pretend they were chums with her.

On hearing the children's cries, Memsahib would instantly stop, whatever the mission that had that day drawn her out of the big house. The dust would roll over the squirming children, Memsahib would roll down her window with a smile and the children would scramble madly for the sweets and other eatables that their kind white grandmother would shower on them.

She had long come to regard the whole thing as some kind of ritual in which she played a priestly role. It was not only an honour. The way she saw it, it was more of an obligation. The children had to be kept happy, and the parents likewise. Only then could one keep peace with the populace in general. She must have kept in her car sacks upon sacks of sweets and the other good things, for in one trip alone, from her domicile to wherever it was she happened to be going, she could be stopped by the cries no less than a dozen times.

She had no children herself, as far as we could tell, and it could safely be assumed that it did fulfil her little white soul in no small measure, the spectacle of so many pairs of young eyes turned to her in breathless expectation, yes, even despite the prudent scepticism that she noticed in the parents of these same children as they silently eyed the passage of the big car with its lone precious passenger. This distant attitude on the part of people whose children she was showing a motherliness she was sure they lacked at home, she clearly could not comprehend. Wretched ingratitude, she put it down to. It was odd really, she would let it be known, how she was being repaid, considering her many benevolent years with us.

Sometimes the children, being children, would follow the great white

lady home, arriving there long after the dust from the big car had settled away all along the road leading to Mem sahib's house. They were no doubt itching to find out whether there at the big shining house, there could be found more of the sweetness encountered at the roadside.

In the foolishness of their desires they would for the moment totally forget their fear of the harsh glitter of Mem sahib's residence and the soul-stirring greenness surrounding it. But they would not have gone far in their confidence before the sight of the place they were headed for broke in upon them and instantaneously stopped them short of their objective, first the fence, then the unapproachable serenity within, quickly emptying their hearts of their folly.

They would then just content themselves to hang around, dusty little black boys in patched tatters suddenly reminded of the ringworms, the jiggers and the lice eating them alive. They would peep through the fence, it being tight but not tight enough to keep out little boys' adventurous eyes.

And there she would be, their loving white grandmother, in her rocking chair beneath her favourite guava tree, now so gone away from this world of little boys into that of a book she would be reading, with only the gigantic, sadly useless dog as her companion in all that vastness of a lawn.

They would watch her rock herself to sleep over her book, so unaccountable now in her lofty calmness, so coolly and easily away from them and their filth and their petty greed, that they would be left wondering where all the sweetness had gone to, and just how it was possible for the woman to so completely and suddenly change herself from the inviting warmth of the roadside into the magnificent coldness they were staring at.

# Uhuru sasa! Freedom now!

Uhuru sasa! Freedom now! Thus rang the Swahili battle cry for Independence in colonial Kenya. That cry climaxed in gory clashes between Mau Mau nationalist guerillas and colonial government forces. Two decades after Independence from Britain the crucial questions which bred conflict beg redress again under different political circumstances.

The indigenous leadership has scarcely acquitted themselves better than the colonial master. The dreams which fired the fierce struggles for Independence have proved illusory. A peasantry uprooted by the forces of capitalist industrialization and a widening of the gap between rich and poor have engendered a general sense of unease in Kenya. Government disclaimers notwithstanding the Ngugis' creative antennae have effectively registered what one might characterize as Kenya's palpitations.

Originally written in Gikuyu and co-authored by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii with reportedly peasant participation, *I Will Marry When I Want* (Ngaahika Ndeenda) broadens new vistas for indigenous African drama. New vistas? Those powerful ingredients of indigenous African drama often blurred by the obscurantist tendencies of Africa's best playwrights come alive in this play. Ritual and lyricism, dance and mime are strategically deployed throughout the play to maintain a strange and tenuous balance between the enacted suffering of the people and our sense of theatre and play. One becomes quickly aware that any lines in levity are deceptive and that the play's innocuous title conveys more.

The habit of marrying when one wants is a break with the tradition of old Africa. Such a break is only part of the metaphoric point advanced by the two Ngugis in this play. Implicit also is a clarion cry for a collective assumption of Kenya's destiny, something frequently underscored by some of the people's songs like this recurrent refrain:

Come my friend  
Come my friend  
We reason together.  
Our hearts are heavy

Over the future of our children.  
Let's find ways of driving away darkness  
From the land. (p.106)

In the previous works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, particularly *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, key characters make gusty efforts to drive away darkness from the land. Such effort is repeated in *I Will Marry When I Want*. Here again the battle lines are clearly drawn between those who represent that darkness and those who represent light. For the authors, there is no disguise of sympathy and ire. We easily identify the rich and *nouveau riche* as the forces of darkness, and the poor as their just and indignant antagonists. The former are Christian and plastic while the latter are rural and human.

The central victim of this three act drama is a woman. That choice is obviously in keeping with the recent trend in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's works. Such choice, still unusual for a traditional African sensibility, universalizes for both sexes Ngugi's campaign for social justice. It enables the writer to delineate a level vision in which the fate of women in society becomes easily analogous to the fate of the poor. Indeed it is on that unifying basis that dramatic action advances on two simultaneous successful prongs.

On one level, Gathoni, daughter of Kiguunda and Wangeci, whose family represents the poor, is ranged against a visually absent John Muhuuni, son of Kio wa Kanoru, whose family represents the rich. Gathoni eventually becomes victim of the oppression of the poor by the rich because an ill-advised affair with Muhuuni results in pregnancy. Kanoru denies parental consent for marriage. He suggests, first, a Christian wedding for Kiguunda and Wangeci for induction into Christianity, a precondition rejected by Gathoni's family. As in many stories by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in which women are sexually exploited, Gathoni flees from the safety of home to become a barmaid. On the other level, Kio wa Kanoru, Christian hypocrite, lures Kiguunda into deeding away his last piece of land for a bank loan. Kanoru offers to co-sign in anticipation of probable default. When Kiguunda realizes Kanoru's treachery, he arms himself with a sword and visits Kanoru, determined to nullify the agreement by force. Jezebel, Kanoru's wife frustrates Kiguunda with a gun and the agreement remains in force. Kiguunda's default enables Kanoru to purchase and acquire the piece of land in a government auction.

The various actions of the characters in the play are drawn in such a way that the entire drama stands as an update of the treachery of

colonialism in Africa. The only difference this time is the replacement of the alien white masters with indigenous blacks. The switch intensifies pathos.

*I Will Marry When I Want* is Marxist dialectics applied on the dynamic motion of Kenyan history. Aided by montage, the past is repeatedly exhumed to probe the roots of contemporary socioeconomic ills and force a comparison between a satisfactory cultural past broken by colonialism, and a sterile modern era. The resistance of past heroes like Waiyaki is juxtaposed against the modern struggle in which Kiguunda is involved. Often, the Mau Mau rebellion is glorified as the peak of such struggle. Its ghosts are appropriately awakened in fervent rituals with touching incantations. In typical Marxist disdain, religion is faulted in the past and present as 'The alcohol of the soul ... the poison of the mind' (p.61). Religion is one of the social forces used in preventing people from acting independently, figuratively speaking, marrying when they want! That charge is supported with unstinted efforts in the characterization of the rich and powerful of society. Throughout the play those familiar elements of traditional African drama — song, dance, and mime — cease to be merely aesthetic in their function but refurbished strategies through which the writers' cultural nationalism find assertion.

Many Ngugi readers (watchers) will find many other things in this play. Religious readers, particularly Christians, will find the repeated onslaught against religion offensive. Previous readers of Ngugi may find the message boring because they have heard it before. The new reader may find the play's topicality distracting but intriguing. The play promises to be gravelly for white readers, and, of course, a stirring triumph for the radical African. All in all, after these various eyes have seen or read this play, everyone is likely to guess why the Gikuyu version was banned by the Government of Kenya after a very successful full month outing in 1977.

#### NOTES

1. Ngugi wa Thiong'o & Ngugi wa Mirii. *I Will Marry When I Want*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1982. 121 pages, £1.95.

# Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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## INTERVIEW

Ingrid Björkman interviewed Ngugi wa Thiong'o in London in December 1982 when they discussed his play *Maitu Njugira*, its background, reception and the reason for its banning by the Kenyan Government. Prior to that she was in Kenya where she interviewed people who had acted in the play as well as people who had seen it. The photographs are taken during a performance of the play. Because of security we are unable to give the name of the photographer.

Although permission was not granted for it to be performed at the Kenya National Theatre in Nairobi, as was planned, *Maitu Njugira* was nevertheless a tremendous success. Whilst waiting for the stage licence to arrive, the theatre group went on rehearsing at the University. Between twelve and fifteen thousand people managed to see the musical before it was finally stopped. The rehearsals started at 6.30 p.m., but after 3 p.m. it was impossible to get a seat in the hall. Hired buses came from all over the country, even from as far away as Mombasa.

### *Why was the musical set in the 20s and 30s?*

Because that was when British colonialism introduced capitalism into Kenya. Now, to have capitalism you must of course have a wage-earning class. To get a wage-earning class they had to create a landless peasantry and this was done very easily by taking away people's land. The conditions in these plantations were very, very harsh, indeed. The workers could be beaten, even killed.

In order to obtain efficient control of the Kenyan labour force the colonial government passed several labour laws, for example the native registration ordinances, which made it compulsory for adult male African workers in Kenya to wear a chain and a metal container around their necks. Inside the container was an identification paper with information useful to the employer. Together with the paper the container was

called the kipande. Not carrying a kipande was considered a criminal act and carried severe punishment. The emerging African petty bourgeoisie, however, was exempted from the kipande, as their labour force was not needed in the plantations. It can be seen that the kipande gave the African worker a lower status and thus contributed to the founding of the sharply structured Kenyan class society.

Whilst the capitalist wage-labour system created a Kenyan working class, it also forged the strength and consciousness of that working class against imperialism. Now, in the 20s and 30s, the workers of Kenya waged a tremendous struggle against these repressive labour conditions, especially as they were symbolized by the kipande system. And there developed songs of the different Kenyan nationalities in Kenya, expressing these anti-imperialist interests and their struggle against the repressive labour systems. So when I was about to script the play, I had to get these songs from different people. In assembling the songs I was helped by many people from different nationalities. There are four types of songs in the play. There are songs which were sung in the 20s and 30s, with the appropriate tunes and words. In other cases I have used old tunes and put in new words to fit into the situation of the play. On some occasions there are fresh compositions with new words and new tunes but of course related to the history of the period. And then there are contemporary songs, the tunes of which people are familiar with, but I have moved them back to the earlier period by giving them words that are, broadly speaking, appropriate to those times.

*The result of this collective work has been an all-Kenyan musical drama, which addresses itself to Kenyans of all nationalities. The spoken text, which is in Gikuyu, is confined to a minimum and the drama relies heavily on mime, song and dance, which are, Ngugi says, 'part and parcel of the national cultural traditions of the Kenyan people'.*

*Was that the reason why you chose the art form of a musical?*

Yes, one of the reasons. The peasants often expressed themselves through song. Their songs were functional. They sang during their work, when they were digging the earth, harvesting, building the railway and so on. There are songs of fatigue. People sang to get strength and courage. If you look at the struggles of Kenya, you will find that the revolt of the people has often been expressed through their cultural assertions, especially through song.

Another reason for making *Martu Njugiro* a musical was that it was going to be performed at the National Theatre in Nairobi, where of

course one anticipated audiences from different nationalities and different linguistic groups, who would not necessarily understand Gikuyu. So I was trying to develop a theatre that could speak to people despite the language barriers. In *Maitu Njugira* there was less emphasis on dialogue and more emphasis on action, dance, mime and song.

*In Kenya, a few months ago, I interviewed a number of non-Gikuyu speaking Kenyans who had seen Maitu Njugira, in order to find out if they had understood the play. Everybody, even quite illiterate informants, had understood it completely and gave me detailed information about the story. And everybody had been profoundly moved. Many had seen the musical several times. I was told that towards the end of the performance the audience had often streamed onto the stage, joined in the dancing, and the whole theatre had united in the final song. They had been filled with sadness, with hope, and above all with the feeling that 'we are one people, we are all Kenyans'. And they had walked home in the warm night singing 'A people united can never be defeated'.*

*I am told, however, that the ending of the original script was not positive. Is that correct?*

Yes. But the actors rejected the ending, because they found it too pessimistic. They felt that they had to show that despite the tremendous oppression the struggle continues. The fact that one was defeated did not mean that one could not rise up again and continue the struggle.

*According to the people who were interviewed the actors had really succeeded in conveying their spirit of defiance and survival to the audience by emphasizing the symbolic solution shown in different silent scenes: a stick is broken into pieces, one piece after another. Then the broken pieces are tied together into a bundle — and look! It is impossible to break the bundle.*

*One of the questions I asked was 'why had the audience been so fascinated and moved by the play. Most people interviewed said it was because of the strong commitment and the exceptional creative power of the actors, who were not professionals but workers from Kamirithu village and Nairobi. How was it possible, people asked, that ordinary uneducated people could perform in such an outstanding way? One of the informants said: 'They did not perform. They were themselves.'*

*To this question Ngugi replied:*





*The opening scene: the suffering Kenyan peasantry.*



*A bundle of sticks can not be broken. A people united can never be defeated.*

I think the reason why they participated with such great enthusiasm was that they felt that the play was telling them something about themselves. They felt that the theatre they evolved was reflecting the true history of their struggle against the colonial stage of imperialism. And they participated in so many ways, all the time. They taught us how to dance. They rejected songs and added new ones. They really participated in developing the script, which is definitely not the work of one man.

*Some of the participants told me how happy they were while working with the two plays. Now they say they have lost their hope. The communal art of traditional society seems to have been revived at Kamirithu, which must have meant a lot to the villagers?*

The important thing is not so much that it is communal but rather what it has to say. It is the nature of reality reflected in that art. In this case the people felt that the theatre they evolved was part and parcel of their true history. But of course I think that art, theatre, should be communal. Cultural activity is something that is natural for everybody, not just for a few professional artists. Evolving theatre is creative. It stimulates, creates discussion.

One reason for my choosing the dramatic art form is that more people get involved. It makes them discuss not only the script but also their social problems. And in the course of the discussion it happened that they changed the script.

*Don't you think that they had a feeling that this dramatic action could lead them to another sort of action, that they could help to change their social reality?*

I recently read a line from Martin Carter. It goes like this: 'I do not sleep to dream/ I dream to change the world.' People must not only understand the world but they must understand it in order to change it, to make it meet their needs in a more meaningful way.

*The audience felt that the musical was telling them something about themselves, and that was the main reason for their commitment. The play took place on a plantation where the white settler, after having been shot by the workers because of his ruthless oppression, is succeeded by a Kenyan who continues the oppression of the people in the same way as his predecessor. The musical is set in the 20s and 30s with a background of projections of slides showing the actual laws regulating the conditions*

of the workers at that time. However, the audience had felt that the musical reflected not only the social reality of Kenyans fifty years ago but also their own contemporary reality. They had seen the present through the past, and they had realized that Kenyan society had not changed in any essential respect since those days.

To understand this one has to make it clear how Kenya has developed after flag independence. Have the dreams of freedom been realized? No, they have not. Kenyan raw materials and markets are controlled and the Kenyan people are ruthlessly exploited by foreign imperialist forces, supported by a corrupt native ruling class which has been educated within the colonial system and has inherited the colonial ideology. The people who fought the struggle of independence have been betrayed. In order to change their conditions they have to unite across the borders of language, nationalities, races.

Now, the economic consequences of neo-colonialism are massive impoverishment of the peasantry and the working population. Politically the ruling regime becomes even more detached from the people and it can only maintain power by detention and murder of democratic dissidents and through military terrorism of the entire population. We have never been allowed to try out democracy in Kenya and see if it worked. But the oppression was less comprehensive previously, more sporadic than it is now.

But economic and political control can never be complete and efficient without mental control through the control of the people's culture. The native bourgeoisie, through which imperialism in a neo-colonial state like Kenya works, controls the state instruments of coercion, persuasion and propaganda. In their state-controlled cinemas, theatres, TV stations and radio they allow foreign programmes. No foreign play or any play by foreign European groups has ever been prevented from staging at the National Theatre. At the same time as *Maitu Njugira* was stopped from being performed at the National Theatre, *Flame Trees of Thika*, a film in seven episodes based on Elspeth Huxley's book of the same title, was bought and screened on Kenya National Television despite a great national outcry. The book pictures the Kenya of the 20s and 30s, the same period as *Maitu Njugira*, but from a colonial point of view. Both the book and the film portray Kenyans as dumb creatures, part and parcel of the animal world and natural landscape. A musical, depicting in a Kenyan language and music the heroic struggle of Kenyan workers against the very repressive colonial labour laws was hounded out of the Kenya National Theatre.

But a film showing that Kenyans had no capacity for resistance was given prime time on television for several weeks. Now the Government has increased its control by censoring and even stopping small plays which school pupils perform for each other. The police go through libraries to find out who reads what, and all school text books must be approved by a special commission.

*In discussing neo-colonialism one of the inevitable subjects is culture-clash; could you say something about this?*

The conflict of cultures is often seen in the simple terms of a conflict between the rural and the urban, or between tradition and modernity, but this is a deliberate mystification of the real conflict. The conflict is class-bound. Out of the struggle for total liberation from imperialism there emerged a new national culture, rooted in the patriotic and heroic traditions of the peasantry. The programmed attempts to destroy people's dances, songs and literature created its opposite. There are today in the colonies and neo-colonial societies two cultures in mortal conflict: a foreign imperialist culture and a national patriotic culture, which is a resistance culture and is both urban and rural. This national culture is in opposition to foreign imperialist exploitation and domination as well as to internal exploitation and oppression by a native ruling class in servile alliance with imperialism.

The period in which *Maitu Njugira* is set was the period when this modern culture of resistance emerged. There was a tremendous cultural assertion. Most of our poets and singers in the 20s and 30s as well as in the 50s were imprisoned by the British for the songs they sang.

Fifty years ago, thirty years ago, the singers of the people were imprisoned by the British. Today they are imprisoned by their fellow-countrymen. *Maitu Njugira* is made up of songs from the 30s which were forbidden then. It pictures the social reality of the 30s. And it is forbidden today. One can have no clearer illustration of how those in power today have dissociated themselves from their own people and have identified with the former colonial power.

*As a writer in what way do you think you can help change our world into a better one?*

As a writer I can only help people to understand the forces at work in their society. I can only hope to try as faithfully as I can to reflect all these forces. And I would like people to understand what affects their

lives and in the very process of understanding — be they Kenyans, Swedish, British, Americans — help them work out for themselves the options open to them.



*The face of neo-colonialism. Uniform as well as ideology inherited. Kenyan police officer*

## A Statement

Below is the statement made by Ngugi wa Thiong'o on the Kenya Government's refusal to grant a stage licence to Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre Theatre Group at a press conference held on Wednesday, 10 March 1982.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Press, I have been asked by the management committee of Kamiriithu Theatre Group and those responsible for the production of our new play, *Maithu Njugira*, to express the following observations regarding our efforts to obtain a government stage licence for the Kenya National Theatre.

First I must express our extreme disappointment and even much anger at the grossly irresponsible manner in which the authorities chose to deal with our application for the licence, normally a quick routine administrative procedure, unnecessary in most countries, but introduced in most British colonies as a method of vetting and censoring native cultural expression.

Dutifully we applied for this licence in writing on 2 November 1981 to the Nairobi Provincial Commissioner. We then followed this up with a reminder on 12 November 1981. On 18 November 1981 we got a letter from the Nairobi Provincial Commissioner's Office asking us to do something that no other theatre group has ever been asked to do, that is, to go back to the District Commissioner, Kiambu, to ask for a recommendation, this on the pretext that the physical address of our Group was in Kiambu. Still we went ahead and on 25 November 1981 we wrote to the District Commissioner, Kiambu, asking for a recommendation. We have never received a reply from the D.C. Kiambu but throughout December 1981 and January 1982 the Chairman of our Group, Mr Ngugi wa Miri, kept moving between Kiambu and Nairobi trying to get a reply and a result to our application. On 5 February 1982 we wrote a second reminder to the Nairobi Provincial Commissioner. On 16 February 1982, three days before the scheduled opening of our performances at the

Kenya National Theatre, we wrote a third reminder, which we even copied to the Chief Secretary.

To all these letters and reminders, the Government, through the Nairobi Provincial Commissioner, never responded in writing. Instead the management of the Kenya National Theatre was given secret instructions not to allow our group into the theatre either for the technical rehearsals starting on 15 February or for the opening night of 19 February. The police must have also been given instructions to harass us, for on 19 February, the police kept patrolling the grounds of the Kenya National Theatre where our Group sat singing, waiting for a last minute reply to our application for the stage licence.

After 19 February, our Group resumed rehearsals at the Theatre Two of the University of Nairobi where we had been rehearsing. But once again, on 25 February, the University authorities were instructed by telephone not to allow us the use of their premises. I would like to make it clear that up to now the Government has not formally written to us about the fate of our application.

By so doing, the Government denied us one of the most elementary human and democratic rights: the right of every human community to cultural expression. The administration's handling of the matter showed total insensitivity to the sheer amount of labour, effort and money put up by a village group over a three-month period. By refusing us a licence, the administration denied Kenyans the right to an entertainment of their choice. The fact that the rehearsals attracted over 10,000 people was an indication that they wanted the show. The play which heavily drew from the songs and dances of different Kenyan nationalities showed practical possibilities for the integration of Kenyan cultures. And as brilliantly directed by Waigwa Wachira and Kimani Gecau, the play suggested a whole new basis for Kenyan theatre. It now looks as if Kenyans, especially peasants, are not supposed to dance, sing and act out their history of struggle against colonial oppression.

The play *Man'u Njugita* draft written by myself and subsequently enriched by the cast is what may be called a dramatized documentary on the forced labour and 'Kipande' laws in the colonial Kenya of the twenties and thirties. It shows the attempts in one community to repulse these and other injustices and to survive as a unit despite tremendous official intrigue and brutality. It shows indirectly the genesis of some of our peoples' subsequent political movement and the seeds of their defeats and partial triumphs.

This play is unlike our earlier effort at communal drama, *Ngaahika*



*Ndaenda*, whose staging was stopped without explanation by the Government in 1977 after a highly acclaimed brief run, and whose basic theme revolved around present day Kenyan society. Understandably, the wealthy who control the Government did not like the stark realities of their own social origins enacted on the stage by simple villagers. As a result, we were harassed, some of us even detained as you know. We did not apologize. We still believe in and stand by the content of that play. The spirit of the Centre (that is, Kamirithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre) was not killed or even impaired.

*Maitu Njugira* by contrast addresses itself to the rulers of a previous, albeit related, era and it came to us as curious that the ghosts of the settler colonial regime of the thirties should in 1982 come to haunt the same tiny circle of wealth that *Ngũgĩ's Ndaenda* so terrified. It now seems, despite constitutional safeguards, that any public examination of Kenya's society, its history or future cannot be done without raising the nervousness of the authorities.

We consider this attitude undemocratic and extremely dangerous. It is our right to represent our art and culture from our own viewpoint so long as in the process no extant law is broken. We have sought to act strictly according to law and with complete legitimacy in all aspects of our work. We have followed the unnecessarily difficult and frustrating due process of registering ourselves, applying for permits and all the other now commonplace pre-requisites of self-expression in Kenya. We have been very patient.

In return we have received official lies, ping-pong tactics from office to office, authority to authority, Ministry to Ministry, never so much as a word of hard decisions, only indirect instructions as for example the administration's last minute letter to the National Theatre not to permit us entry on 15 February 1982. There has been no courage to address decisively or conclusively to our countless communications over a period of three months. Instead only monumental indecision and a farrago of verbal excuses to frustrate us.

The manner in which the refusal of permission to stage the play was carried out reveals a very serious element in Kenya today. The fact that the Government conducted their instructions verbally or by telephone without ever writing to us directly so that no written record exists reinforces a dangerous trend. Thus acts are carried out without any officials being held accountable. Under such an atmosphere, anything can be done to any Kenyan or group of Kenyans by officials without written documentation or accountability.

This is not just simple irresponsibility and heavy-handed use of authority. The Government seems mortally terrified of peasants organizing themselves on their terms and their own initiative.

We wish to denounce in the strongest possible terms the Government's increasing intolerance and repression of the Kenyan people's cultural initiatives. Secondly we now question fundamentally the seriousness of the Government's commitment to Kenyan culture. If, as we are told, the economy has slowed down for 'external factors' of recession, inflation and petroleum prices, we ask, is Kenyan culture to slow down or stagnate for the same reasons? If we had chosen to do often mindless and always irrelevant pieces as the foreign groups we probably might not have met with such official hostility. Foreign theatre can freely thrive on Kenyan soil. But there is no room for Kenyan theatre on Kenyan soil. During the Emergency, the British colonial regime introduced severe censorship of Kenyan theatre, particularly in detention camps like Athi River, and employed African rehabilitation officers to do their dirty work. Similar tactics are being used in Kenya today! We now call for an end of censorship of Kenyan people's cultural expression.

Finally, as you are now aware, we had secured independently a fully sponsored invitation to Zimbabwe to perform during the month of April as part of their rural cultural project. The invitation of the Zimbabwean Ministry of Education and Culture, dated 2 December 1981, and which we accepted on 21 December 1981, was a tremendous boost to our morale and was an important recognition of the contribution of the Kamirithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre to rural community based theatre and was very much in the spirit of intra-African cultural exchange. In our letter of acceptance, we asked our prospective hosts to formalize this invitation, if only for simple protocol, through the relevant authorities in the Kenya Government. We believe they did this in writing. We too have written to the Government through the Ministry of Culture about the visit but we have had no reply.

We now fear that the same forces which worked against our getting a stage licence to perform *Maitu Njugira* at the Kenya National Theatre will now work to prevent the visit of our group to Zimbabwe during April.

Thank you.

1. On Thursday, 11 March, the Government, through the Provincial Commissioner for Central Province, Mr Musila, de-registered Kamirithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre. All theatre activities in the village were stopped.

2. On Friday, 12 March, the District Officer for Limuru led three truck-loads of heavily armed police and demolished Kamirithu people's Open Air Theatre.

3. We were unable to go to Zimbabwe.

KEYAN G. TOMASELLI

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## Theatre, Repression and the Working Class in South Africa

As humanity and, by implication theatre, become more technomorphic, performance outside of a building specifically designed for the purpose is either ignored or pre-packaged as 'street' or 'guerrilla' theatre. Whereas the theatre building functions to separate the audience from the players and entrench the distinction between art and life, these latter styles are an attempt by professionals to overcome this distinction, to draw attention to specific problems in society and to condense the public to alternative everyday forms of theatre. Such theatre, however, remains a novelty (in South Africa at least) for it is a deliberate attempt by actors or directors to involve bystanders in a performance which does not normally occur outside of a theatre. The best examples of such theatre, however, remain spontaneous outbursts by ordinary people who resort to forms of ritual activity to express their feelings and emotions. One South African example of this was the spontaneous expression of discontent by 55 black iron foundry workers who enacted a war dance in front of Department

of Labour officials at an iron foundry. This, together with other aspects of their behaviour which led to their subsequent arrest, later coalesced into a play entitled *Ilanga Le So Phomela Abasebenzi*.

Authentic black theatre in South Africa stands almost alone in its consistent achievements as a medium of working class expression.<sup>1</sup> It has largely been able to resist the bland homogenizing influences of capital, but often what starts out as working-class theatre, is co-opted by capital into an alliance, albeit an uneasy one, where content might reflect decontextualised aspects of conditions of existence without alluding to the causes of those conditions. Gibson Kente's *Mama and The Load*, for example, a musical set in Soweto, reflects broken homes, errant husbands, domineering wives, hawking activity and drunkenness — all effects of apartheid while ignoring causes. The cogency of art, therefore, may be determined by the degree to which it exposes actual conditions of existence, their origins, how they are conformed ideologically and what their social affects are. Working-class theatre in South Africa is thriving and is, in fact, nourished by the very social formation and ideology which suppresses so brutally the majority of people who live and work in South Africa. Generally found in countries with long-standing social problems where there are harsh class conflicts, this type of theatre thrives under political despotism. The content of such theatre is endemic to the specific social formation: it is there waiting to be discovered, given form and communicated to a participant audience who are themselves part of that content. This interaction with actors is a cathartic experience which works to mitigate their lot in a performance which sees no separation or distinction between actor and viewer, stage and life or performance and reality: they are all part of the whole (through metonymy), playing interchangeable roles which inter-connect art with life. This relationship is succinctly captured by Shakespeare's Jaques:

All the world's a stage  
And all the men and women merely players  
They have their exits and entrances  
And one man in his time plays many parts.

Computer technology, as it is employed in much theatre, particularly the state-funded South African theatre companies, vitiates this relationship and redefines it to 'All the world's a computerised stage'. This is the title of a conference which was held in August 1981 by the South African Institute of Theatre Technology at the (whites only) State Theatre in Pretoria. This is a prime example of where technology serves the interests

of ideology and mediates a reality contingent upon the economic and political interests of state.

Third World Theatre is a reaction against this technological fantasisation and seeks to rediscover history from the perspective of working-class culture. Almost independently, it has traversed the same path as did early Greek theatre, working as an information processing centre which spreads outwards from the group of performers into the wider community sensitizing workers to their lot and suggesting ways of improvement. This type of theatre, which I have elsewhere labelled 'committed theatre', seeks to make the viewer perceive, from the inside, the ideology which has brought about the existing conditions of existence. *Ilangu* may be conceptualised as committed worker theatre. This play arose out of the frustrations of a trade union lawyer (Halton Cheadle) who devised a role playing exercise to facilitate successful communication with 55 black iron-foundry workers who had been arrested and assaulted by the police for allegedly striking illegally. During the pre-trial period it became clear to the lawyer that his clients, being illiterate, uneducated migrant workers, had no understanding of courtroom procedure, the desirability of corroborative evidence, accurate statements and the importance of witnesses. Cheadle outlines how the play arose out of the capital-labour conflict so characteristic of worker theatre in South Africa:

In preparing their defence the meeting (between the trade union shopstewards and foundry management) and the strike were reconstructed in order to get proper statements from the accused strikers. During this reconstruction, the workers did not merely re-state what was said, but started assuming roles. The idea of the play arose out of this. The Junction Avenue Theatre group assisted in setting up a theatre workshop with some of the strikers. The play grew from the workshop. The plot closely followed the events at the foundry — the worker-actors strongly realised any alteration of reality.

This paper is primarily concerned with the play's genesis and how its structure has been altered to suit different audiences to whom it has played.

In *Ilangu* we are dealing with the concept of theatre in its widest sense. This idea assumes that most of human social activity can be regarded as types of performance and that performance does not need to be located on a stage to be termed theatre. Since reality is experienced through the mediating structures of language, it may be defined as a complex system of signs through which the real is made. The individual's perception of the meanings of these signs is ideologically determined. All actions,

whether on a stage or anywhere else, are encoded with signs and this definition of performance goes beyond metaphor where the world is like a stage or stands for a stage, but instead uses the metonymic device of stating that the world *is* a stage. This allows us to considerably expand the notion of 'theatre' to include the expression of everyday events such as the actions of iron-foundry workers, miners (e.g. *Egoli — City of Gold*) or prison farm labourers (*Ibumba*).

The play, *Ilanga*, was derived from the initial role playing exercise which formed the basis of the courtroom evidence in the defence of the alleged strikers: *Ilanga* went through a four-stage transformation in its development from strike to theatre. All of these stages, however, were types of performance and are contributors to the structure of the play. The four stages were:

1. The initial trade union activity which took the form of meetings with management over a period of time. The last of these meetings was interpreted as a strike by the white management. By calling the police, this led to the second stage.
2. The trade union lawyer was called in to defend the accused and obtained information about the event through a re-enactment by the workers who had been arrested.
3. Communication of events leading to the meeting or strike was performed in court for the magistrate. At this pre-theatrical level, that is, during the performance in court, the actors (iron-foundry workers) and director (lawyer) articulated their positions and contradictions to the audience (magistrate). At this level, performance is a mediation rather than a reflection, for the outcome of the judgement has obvious implications for the lives of the individual defendants.
4. Once the idea arose to perform the incidents outlined in court in front of a worker audience in a union hall, the performance becomes a play. This brings the transformation to the final stage: the enactment of aspects of the previous events in a union hall. It now becomes theatre. The common denominator through all these stages, then, is the notion of performance.

In *Ilanga*, the performers are the same people who were arrested, tried and convicted. Their original audiences were drawn from workers on the

East Witwatersrand who had all experienced similar industrial conflicts and who comprised the same class. Many had never before seen a play, film, television or Western entertainment of any kind. Under these conditions, the performers are both actors and actants, dramatists and characters; their roles are interchangeable: the characters play themselves and enact their lives before a participant audience which is drawn into the structure of the play. They are consulted about strike issues, they are sworn at if they try to avoid confrontation. In turn, the audience heckle, shout and denounce the black Department of Labour character as a sellout to the government, and so on. This metonymic relation between the performers and the audience is further facilitated by the architecture of a union hall which is not deliberately designed to separate the actors from the audience. Cheadle explains the case with *Mango*:

Part of the problem with a stage is that you don't get a sense of the activity or ambience of a working environment. We wanted to make the audience a part of the performance. Originally we had the black petty bourgeois SEIPSA<sup>2</sup> recruiter sellout come on and face the workers. We changed that. Now he addresses the whole audience and the workers, who were on the stage, go and sit in the front row. The crucial thing was to get the audience to participate in rejecting this character. Two of the performers never go on stage but sit in different places in the audience and would heckle and shout. They would be seen as part of the audience. Well, the response was absolutely spontaneous. We didn't even need those actors to sit in the audience because the whole audience just booed the petty bourgeois sellout as soon as he appeared. He tries to speak to the audience, saying, 'My black brothers, I come from SEIPSA, an employers organization, my name is Mubi...' Then one of the audience actors says, 'Can I ask you a question Mr Thebechali?'<sup>3</sup> Mubi retorts, 'My name's not Thebechali, it's Mubi...' By this time the audience is thoroughly involved and they all shout out their sellout's names which causes endless hilarity. And then we began to find out all the in jokes amongst the workers and the union committee. And the black petty bourgeois SEIPSA representative keeps denying that these are his names: 'I'm one of you,' he pleads.

Other incidents which are acted out in the play are all drawn from worker experiences which have occurred in the foundry. Without this participant audience the play loses its essence and vigour. During the actor-audience debate of whether to strike or not the argument may go on for up to half an hour. There are a number of monologues by different workers who describe life in the foundry and the misery of hostel accommodation. The first character is fatalistic, the second is 'chancer' who 'ducks and dives', and the third is a union representative who complains, 'You have given up and you are ducking and diving. The real answer to our problem lies in the collective struggle.' Cheadle thus describes *Mango* as 'a totally didactic and propagandist play'.

While the play is performed for a participant audience drawn from the same social class as the actors it functions metonymically, connecting actors and audience to each other thereby integrating them with the everyday experiences of life itself. Once the play is removed from this organic environment and transplanted into a more conventional theatre, architecture, technology and functional divisions suppress the spontaneous metonymic components which are replaced with a more controlled metaphorical mediation of the play. The audience remains the audience, the actors are only actors and the content is interpreted as something separate from everyday life. This discontiguity is further strengthened by the fact that the original participant-actors, having lost their jobs, were endorsed out of the white area where the foundry was located, since in terms of the Group Area Act they are not allowed to remain in a 'white' area for more than 72 hours after dismissal. Some of the 5 actors continued in the play, their incomes being supplied by an entrance charge, while vacant roles were filled by black members of the amateur Junction Avenue Theatre group. Once this process began, the original intention of the play was diluted and a degree of institutionalisation began to be introduced.

The composition of the audience also contributes to this art-life dislocation for there is now a class conflict as it is unlikely that the petty bourgeois (mainly white) elements of South African society who would see the play in a theatre, would relate to calls for strike action. They certainly would not participate as the black working-class audience did for they have nothing to relate to. Most, if not all of what the play dealt with would be outside their social experience. Thus, when the play was staged at a University theatre where most of the audience was expected to be white, it had to be considerably restructured to meet the conventions expected by this more sophisticated audience. As Cheadle remarks, white audiences would probably be opposed to striking and rarely think of such action whereas black workers constantly discuss whether, where and when they might strike. In order to resolve these issues where a white audience was present, one of the actors in the audience would say that it is better to go on strike in a week's time unless...

In a conventional theatre the play is uncomfortable and uneasy. The lack of a participant audience, the loss of metonymy and the fact that the play is in Zulu reduces its subtlety and techniques which worked in a union hall become crudely propagandistic and amateurish. The monologues where the three workers address the audience look contrived where they were previously spontaneous; where the worker audience in the hall joined the actors on stage in discussion and argument during tea



time (interval) now the play runs continuously without a break for the petty bourgeois audience wouldn't know what to talk about and would, more likely, escape into the fresh air outside for a coke and a smoke. These observations, of course, raise the question of whether or not this kind of theatre should be staged for the benefit of white audiences at all. The dramatic changes which are required to make the play sensible to such spectators definitely violates the structure of the play and adversely affects performances.

*Nkanga* has done its job. It has run its course and finished its cycle. To try to resurrect it under alien circumstances will ultimately destroy it and force it into the very world of theatrical convention and commodity exchange it is seeking to overcome. Yet elsewhere other plots are bubbling as worker theatre rides the sea of labour discontent. Certain events stand out, for example, the issue of pension funds. Halton Cheadle explains:

Black workers are being coopted into the total strategy through management who are trying to compel workers to belong to pension funds. This raises the issue of where pension funds invest their capital. They invest it in government stocks. The irony of it all is that workers are providing a form of capital accumulation at the expense of their exploitation.

The issues are multiple. The theatrical challenge is whether the working class can overcome the slavery of apartheid-based technology and resist the material advantages of co-option from a largely capital free worker expression, to the lure of wealth, convention and petty bourgeois lifestyles.

## NOTES

1. For further information on the background of this paper, see Keyan G. Tomaselli, 'The Semiotics of Alternative Theatre in South Africa', *Critical Arts: A Journal for Media Studies* 2 No 1 (June 1981), pp.14-33.
2. SEIFSA is the employers organization of the Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of South Africa. It comprises over 60 independent employer associations whose members collectively employ more than 800,000 people of all races.
3. Mr Thebehali is the Government appointed mayor of Soweto, a dormitory residential area of over one million black inhabitants, just outside Johannesburg. Mr Thebehali is regarded as a sellout by the people of Soweto.

# Book Reviews

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Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, eds., *Cowries and Kobos: The West African Oral Tale and Short Story*. Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1981. 177 pp. Dkr45.00.

There are several available anthologies on short West African narrative, but *Cowries and Kobos* charts new territory through its juxtaposition of the oral tale and the short story and its inclusion of critical commentary by a broad spectrum of scholars along with the fiction itself. It should provide a useful introduction to the area for the general reader, a valuable source book for the student and material to stimulate critical debate for the academic.

The range of material is extensive: the volume includes eight oral tales, two extracts from Onitsha market pamphlets, nine short stories from Anglophone and Francophone literatures and a dozen short critical essays. Donald Cosentino's general introduction speaks of the collection's affording the opportunity 'to appreciate the God's plenty of West African traditional and modern storytelling' and this is certainly the impression with which one is left after reading it.

The choice of oral tales focuses on Nigerian cultures. A fine introduction by Helen Chukwuma provides a succinct taxonomy of the types of tale prevalent in the region and is complemented by Neil Skinner's remarks on the Hausa *tsuntsuwa*. Chukwuma shows how the tale differs from more literary narrative in its employment of dramatic and musical elements and in its reliance on audience participation, particularly in shout-and-response sequences. The abrupt moral transitions of the tales and their lack of realistic characterisation further distinguish them from short stories and establish their value as *republican* representations of the 'truths' of their societies. Chukwuma's analysis of the form of the animal tale argues that it is constructed, not around a single central heroic figure, but rather around a contest between two protagonists who compete to outdo one another in trickery. In contrast, the human tale does focus on the individual and usually involves some kind of reworking of the myth of the hero.

In the general introduction Cosentino also stresses the ritual, mythic quality of the oral tale and he sees it as a 'closed artistic system' which does not interact with the genre of the short story. For him the dimensions of the folktale are comic and each particular performance evokes the traditions of the whole of the people's culture, whereas the short story is fragmentary, an import from the developed world and a form in which 'truth' is only glimpsed through the individual 'epiphany'.

Such a distinction is helpful, especially for those who are new to the field, but it poses problems. They arise partly because the view of the short story, derived from the Joycean approach to the form, is delimiting, but more seriously because to regard the two genres as quite discrete is to imply that the West African short story writer is completely alienated from the traditional narrative modes of his society. Clearly the transition from

communal oral storytelling to individual written composition suggests that the writer has lost the role of griot or oral repository of his people's culture and adopted that of Western literary artist. But committed West African writers in the post-independence period frequently see themselves as assuming communal responsibilities akin to those of the traditional artist. Those whose work contributes to the process of national reconstruction may reasonably claim to be latter-day equivalents of the griot rather than quasi-Western artists dramatising the 'epiphanies' of an individual sensibility.

Elsewhere in *Cowries and Kobos* the interplay between the two genres becomes clearer. Kirsten Holst Petersen's introduction to the short story deals with its relationship to the oral tale more satisfactorily. Though she subscribes to Cosentino's basic distinction between the two forms, she makes necessary qualifications, particularly by seeing the various uses to which the short story is put as a product of the cultural fragmentation of contemporary Africa and suggesting the possibility of the form's helping to 'humanise' the march of 'progress' on the continent.

The fusion of traditional and modern narrative styles can also be seen in several of the stories themselves. It is particularly apparent in Francis Bebey's 'Edda's Marriage', in which the narrator is a villager caught between traditional and colonial worlds, and Chinua Achebe's 'Vengeful Creditor', in which the authorial voice sides firmly with community values. In such instances, where the short story writer adopts a socially committed narrative stance which can be seen as a post-independence equivalent of the griot's tribal responsibility, the interaction between genres makes for cross-cultural fertilisation (part of the humanising process of which Petersen writes?) rather than the abandonment of the traditional for the modern.

In addition to providing a fine general introduction to short West African narrative and material to stimulate critical debate of the above kind, *Cowries and Kobos* also offers a number of excellent short prefaces to particular writers and topics, among them Ama Ata Aidoo, Sembene Ousmane, Francis Bebey, Achebe as short story writer and the short story in *Présence Africaine*. Two themes which are particularly well represented and discussed are the lure of bourgeois values in the post-independence period and the woman's predicament in contemporary West Africa. The latter theme is interestingly introduced by Ama Ruthenford's preface to Cyprian Ekwensi's 'Fashion Girl', in which she discusses the changes in social relationships brought about by urbanisation and sees Ekwensi, for all his 'male double standards', as expressing the raw realities of this new situation, in which the woman's role undergoes dramatic transformations. Other stories carry more obvious feminist messages: Ama Ata Aidoo's 'Two Sisters' presents a character who, like Ekwensi's fashion girl, succumbs to the temptations offered by the new bourgeoisie by becoming the mistress of a 'big man', but also portrays the other side of the coin, since this character's sister is a deceived wife and ultimately both emerge as victims of a corrupt social order; Sembene Ousmane's 'Her Three Days' attacks the subjugation of women in a polygamous Islamic society.

The two extracts from Onitsha chapbooks may initially appear to be at odds with the general scheme of the volume as neither is, properly speaking, narrative fiction. Ogali Ogali's 'Veronica My Daughter' is a drama; Okenwa Olinah's 'No Condition is Permanent' aphoristic and philosophical homily. Yet their inclusion seems appropriate, for they reflect the breaking down of genres in this middle area of Nigerian popular narrative and 'Veronica My Daughter' affords an excellent example of the collision between different value-systems, underlined by the different linguistic registers through which the characters are dramatised.

*Cowries and Kobos* is the fifth volume in Dangaroo Press's Commonwealth Series. The high production standards one is coming to expect of Dangaroo publications are maintained and in this instance the illustrations, by Adebisi Akanji and others, are a particular delight.

JOHN THIEME

Leslie Monkman, *A Native Heritage. Images of the Indian in English-Canadian Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981. 194 pp. Can.\$25.00.

Leslie Monkman has written a book that students of Canadian literature have been waiting for ever since the conspicuous appearance of the Canadian Indian on the literary scene in and around 1970. As we see in Monkman's book, the Indian was never entirely absent from Canadian literature although he was certainly relegated to the fringes. However, by 1975 he appeared as the most dominant topic in Canadian letters. That year saw the publication of Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*, Robert Kroetsch's *Gone Indian*, Peter Such's *Riverrun*, W. O. Mitchell's *The Vanishing Point*, and Sharon Pollock's *Wahh* just to mention some of the best known and among which *The Temptations of Big Bear* and *Gone Indian* have already acquired the status of modern Canadian classics. Monkman does not try to explain this sudden outburst of primitivism which may be seen as a parallel to a similar phenomenon a decade earlier in the USA (see e.g. Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (1968)); that would demand extensive historical and sociological studies which would be outside the scope of this book.

Leslie Monkman examines literary material ranging from 1766 (Robert Rogers' *Pontech, or The Saviour of America*) to 1977 (Rudy Wiebe's *The Scorching Wood People* and Robertson Davies' *Pontiac and the Green Man*). The basic argument of the book is that the Indian in Canadian literature was always important when the white man wanted to say something about himself and to define his own culture. The Indian was not dealt with for his own sake but supplied the white man with well defined enemies and heroes or became the illustration of certain concepts.

Chapter Two discusses the Indian as antagonist. Numerous examples are offered in which the Indian is seen as a savage pagan who should be tamed along with the wilderness in which he lived. The Indian stands for chaos and darkness in contrast to white order which was administered with evangelical fervour. Richardson's *Wacouata* (1832) is given as an example of a work which goes beyond the simplistic association of savagery with the Indian; it points out that both races carry within themselves a potential for savagery and cruelty.

In Chapter Three Monkman deals with the image of the Indian and his culture as superior to the white man and his culture. Francis Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague* (1769), W.O. Mitchell's *The Vanishing Point* (1975), and Margaret Laurence's *Manawaka* cycle all emphasize the positive aspects of Indian culture. We find in these works a pastoral yearning for simplicity where the Indian and his relation to nature, his natural religion, become attractive, because it seems to offer a worth-while

alternative to alienated modern white civilization. Monkman substantiates his argument by suggestive readings of Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* (1888), W.G. Mitchell, and Margaret Laurence.

Chapter Four, 'Death of the Indian', looks at another use of the Indian. Well into this century the Indian seemed to belong to a dying race and as such he became a memento mori to the white man. The Indians are treated as casualties of history, just like other great cultures; their extinction is inevitable irrespective of their heroic struggle. These works strike an elegiac note that we find prevalent in the 'ubi sunt' poems of the late middle ages. Peter Such's *Riverrun* (1973) which recreates the final extinction of the Beothuk tribe in Newfoundland is a good example of a work which carries meaning beyond the historical incident described.

The following chapter on 'Indian Heroes' is really an extension of the chapter 'Indian Alternatives'. Monkman considers the popularity of the two white Indians Pauline Johnson and Grey Owl and discusses in detail what he calls 'mediating Messiahs', i.e. Tecumseh, Big Bear, and Louis Riel, all of them good chiefs and leaders who appear in the works of Don Gutteridge, John Coulter, and Rudy Wiebe. Each of them is seen, in the semi-fictional versions at hand, to harbour a potential, a kind of truth and honesty, that has been lost in modern white society. White civilization is measured against these prophet-like giants and found wanting. Especially the half-breed, Louis Riel, seems to have stirred the imagination of many writers. As a cultural mediator between the two races he no doubt symbolizes what many Canadian intellectuals would like to see: a kind of unity in diversity. Here, and in the last chapter, 'Indian Myths and Legends' in white Canadian literature, in particular in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966) and Robert Kroetsch's *Gone Indians* (1973), Leslie Monkman offers material for a discussion of one of the most controversial uses of the Indian and his culture by contemporary white artists.

As a non-Canadian I feel that in time the Indians will react strongly against the subtle manipulation of their great men and the taking over of their myths and legends, just as they will most certainly react against the almost pathetic plea for ancestor-sharing that is found in some writers. They cannot help seeing this as a new subtle way of exploitation and a variety of the earlier policy of assimilation. Professor Monkman's book is well written and stimulating and it will prove its value not only as a manual on the Indian in Canadian literature, but it will also serve as a starting point for urgent discussions on the future relationship between the red and white cultures.

JORN CARLSEN

Bruce Bennett (ed.), *Cross Currents: Magazines and Newspapers in Australian Literature*. Longman Cheshire, 1981. Aust.\$25.00.

*Cross Currents* is an uneven, stimulating compilation which enlarges our understanding of Australian culture in a number of ways. Periodicals have played an important part in the development of literature in Australia. Some, like the *Bulletin* and *Tabloid Story*, have been instrumental in fostering certain modes in periods of literary growth; others

have sustained small groups of writers and readers through dry seasons. For poets and short-fiction writers they are essential: the first, and often the only, avenues of publication. Without magazines the arts of poetry and short-story writing would not have evolved the way they did in Australia. A well-known example is enough to illustrate this. Modernist innovations were assimilated in Australian painting, in the novel and even in music, but apparently resisted in poetry. This seeming paradox can be partly explained by the fact that, unlike painters, novelists and composers, poets had to find their audience through magazines whose editors, after the collapse of *Angry Penguins* in the wake of the Ern Malley affair, were cautious about being trapped like Max Harris, if they were not, like James McAuley, triumphantly hostile to modernism.

Bruce Bennett's idea of examining the role of periodicals in Australian literary history was a good one, though the resulting book, despite the inclusion of good historical studies, like Elizabeth Webby's on literary journalism before the *Bulletin* and Craig Munro's account of P.R. Stephenson and the *Australian Mercury*, is largely a compilation of sources in which the connections and interpretations of literary history remain implicit. Not that this is a bad thing; on the contrary, it makes it a useful volume for students of Australian literature, who will find that it stimulates new ideas and opens up unexplored regions for further investigation.

At the heart of the book are a series of accounts and recollections by editors or contributors, of a range of Australian periodicals from the *Bulletin* to *Tabloid Story*. The angle of approach and focus of attention in these is extremely varied. A.C. Stephens is represented by the diary which he kept during his years at the *Bulletin*, and for a couple of short periods later, in an edition by Leon Cantrell; Jack Lindsay reflects critically on his espousal of his father's ideas in *Purem*; Peter Cowan recalls the importance of *Angry Penguins* to a young writer in the forties, and manages to put the whole venture in perspective at last; the founding and survival of *Meanjin* is surveyed by Lynne Strahan and Chris Wallace Crabbe; Stephen Murray-Smith describes his long personal involvement with *Overland*; Patrick Morgan struggles with the complexities and seeming contradictions in James McAuley's thought, to show how it shaped *Quadrant*, within the guiding principles of the International Congress for Cultural Freedom, and the story of *Tabloid Story* is retold by Michael Wildgen.

There are other riches besides these, including an analysis of Douglas Stewart's editorship of the *Bulletin*, by Tom Shapcott, in which he employs his skills as an accountant, as well as his insight as a poet, to demonstrate how Stewart transformed the Red Page into a forum for modern Australian poetry, while retaining an unsurprising predilection for his own verses. Peter Pierce supplies a witty review of some of the little magazines of the seventies which is so guardedly allusive at times that I find it difficult to follow the intricacies of local poetic warfare; John McLaren contributes an interesting selective analysis of reviewing in newspapers and periodicals in the post-war decades, including some comments on *Australian Book Review*, which he edits.

All these, together with the historical and interpretive contributions, add up to a book with a multiplicity of directions. It is not simply a survey, a collection of literary memoirs, a history of literary magazines, or an account of literature in Australian periodicals, but it touches all these approaches and many more. Bruce Bennett has tried to capitalise on this variety by creating a book which amplifies previous studies of Australian literary magazines without repeating them. This is mainly successful. However, despite the fact that completeness was not attempted, and would have been impossible, one notable gap, and a couple of points on which wider coverage might have been expected, suggest an im-

provision that the book was compiled from what was readily available (though most contributions were apparently commissioned for this collection).

The successes have already been intimated. They result from the stimulating effect of this juxtaposition of varied material. For example, it suggests the basis for an investigation into the long, but fluctuating awareness of North American culture in Australia. Elizabeth Webby picks up numerous references to American literature in the early periodicals, some of which, like the *Journal of Australia* looked forward to the day when Australia would produce poets of the stature of Bryant, Longfellow or Halleck, a hope very richly fulfilled.

During the nineteenth century, the time lag separating Australians from America seemed to be less than it was later. On Elizabeth Webby's evidence, the works of authors like Poe, Emerson, Melville and Whitman were read and discussed in the colonies in the decades before 1880, and a few American writers, notably Bret Harte, were very influential. Citing an unpublished Ph.D. thesis by G.D. Ailwood Keel, she suggests that the *Bulletin* itself may have been modelled on American journals. Yet Chris Wallace Crabbe relates of the mid-1950s that 'it is hard to believe how unavailable' American books then were. He is writing, of course, from the perspective of the 1980s, when in the wake of the little magazines of the seventies, the United States again exercises a strong influence on Australian culture. It would be fascinating to know more about its ebb and flow.

Of related interest is the history of modernism in Australia, on which this collection offers some tantalising insights. Modernist innovations had, of course, only a limited success in Britain, while on this matter the United States and Australia were completely opposed to each other. The 1920s are sometimes considered the American years in western culture because of the way writers and artists in the U.S. took over modernism and developed it for their own purposes, so that it became the hallmark, and in its present degenerate form, the cliché, of American art. In precisely the same decade, the publication of *Fires* inaugurated a determined resistance to modernism in eastern Australia which persisted through *Quadrant* until the present day. Perhaps it was only ever centred in Sydney, but from wherever it emanated, it saw off the whole modernist attack, fast, spin and donkey-drop, with the inescapable doggedness of Len McKay in his heyday, leaving Australia poetry about to notch up the slowest century in the history of the art.

This leads to another consideration implicit in this collection: the role of regional distinctions and rivalries in the development of Australian culture. This is mentioned by Peter Cowan and Bruce Bennett in their account of the founding and survival of *Westerly*. They see the magazine as falling on the 'forum' side of the informal distinction running through this book, between magazines issued with explicit or implicit manifestos, like *Angry Penguins* or *Quadrant*, and those which provide a forum for various literary styles and opinions, but *Westerly* also has a quite necessary regional bias. Indeed the provision of a balanced forum is perhaps an appropriate western counter to the deplorable tendency of editors and intellectuals from the capital of New South Wales to identify their domain with Australia.

*Southerly*, another long-surviving 'forum' magazine, has sometimes been the vehicle for such pronouncements. Stuart Lee, in his measured presidential review of the magazine, comments on its Sydney associations, in its title, its editors (especially the second, dubbed by his biographer 'a man of Sydney'), and in its shifting relationship with the Sydney Branch of the English Association. All these have contributed a bias to the magazine which its guise as a 'forum' does not conceal.

However, the best contribution *Cross Currents* makes to understanding regionalism in Australia is the context it provides for the short lives and sudden deaths of the Jindyworobak movement and *Angry Penguins*. I had not realised before how tempting it is to see them as victims of regional rivalry. Both were demolished from Sydney, Jindyworobak through a heavy barrage from the pages of *Southerly*, *Angry Penguins* through a plot too well known to need rehearsing. They had almost nothing in common, except their origin in Adelaide and, for a short time, Max Harris. They were, in fact, mutually hostile, and could have been safely left to destroy each other.

Bruce Bennett suggests they were both extreme movements. His book provides evidence to doubt that view. The perception underlying the Jindyworobak idea goes deep in Australia, and, indeed, in any culture which inherits a culture 'out of synch. with its environment', as the Canadian poet Margaret Atwood once put it. Elizabeth Webby, cites an example from 1867, by a pseudonymous author in the *Australian Monthly Magazine*:

'... a young and new nation should seek to imprint early a novel type of thought; that it should in literature, as in policy, fling off the trammels of the systems elsewhere adopted, and give to its actions and thinking a style. And in poetry this must be done by at once flinging aside recollections of other scenery, and selecting both imagery and subjects from our own climate, natural objects, and population...'

This is very similar to what Rex Ingamells would have regarded as a respect for 'environmental values', an idea which is extreme only in the travesty of it promulgated by his critics. Ingamells' weakest verses certainly left themselves open to mockery. The Jindyworobaks were not particularly accomplished young poets, but neither were their critics, at the time. The ridicule from Sydney did not actually stifle the Jindyworobak movement, but it was successful in suppressing its analysis of Australian culture, and putting a caricature in its place.

The attack on *Angry Penguins* was, of course, completely successful and one of the major achievements in the campaign against modernism in Australian poetry. It succeeded in implanting the idea that *Angry Penguins* purveyed an extreme form of poetic gibberish, which is far from the truth, as Peter Cowan demonstrates in an account which points out the solid achievements of the magazine in the forties. For a young writer like himself, not from the eastern seaboard, *Angry Penguins* offered discoveries and created hopes which had to be abandoned after its collapse.

What is interesting about both these cases is that two ventures by very young South Australian poets were effectively crushed before they had time to develop very far. It is also interesting that for about three decades the judgments from Sydney were accepted, giving their authors half a lifetime to develop their own poetry to its modest level of success.

These reflections indicate some of the ways this rewarding book provides discussion. It is likely to arouse much more, for almost every essay individually, or in connection with some of the others, points to areas yet to be explored, or suggests connections and interpretations still to be developed. Herein lies the book's success.

Its chief lapse is the inexplicable omission of any discussion of *Australian Letters*, which is only mentioned twice, in passing. In its time, this periodical was equally important with *Meanym* and *Overland* (and, in fact, all three were once available on a joint subscription concession). *Australian Letters* was broader in its literary and cultural range, and less doctrinaire than *Quadrant*, founded a few months earlier. It was notable



for the recognition and support it gave to Patrick White and Randolph Stow in the face of notorious carping from Sydney, and for its inclusion of essays on various aspects of what is now called 'popular culture', for example, on Australian wine (before it became the trendiest of topics), on beer, on Jack Davy, Bill Harney, and the shark fisherman Jim Cowell; notably, for Randolph Stow's essay on Cole's *Funny Picture Book* and Hal Porter's splendid evocation in prose, with sketches, of Gippsland country towns.

Max Harris's editorship, with Bryn Davies and Geoffrey Dutton, was, as far as I know, his last involvement with a literary magazine (discontinuing the first *Australian Book Review*), and *Australian Letters* showed some interesting continuities and changes in his views as they developed from *Angry Penguins* and *Ern Malley's Journal*. Like the earlier magazines with which he was associated, *Australian Letters* had an 'overseas' orientation, but this was complicated by the fact that its editors were also alert to what was distinctive in Australian culture. Harris never believed this would be some variant of what he called 'outbackery'. He found what he was looking for in the work of certain Australian painters, especially Nolan and Arthur Boyd, whose paintings combined an innovative openness of mode with the discovery of Australian subjects and the creation of myths and legends for the white settlers of the continent. The literary counterpart of this, for Harris, was the fiction of Patrick White and Randolph Stow. Some of his own poems, written in the first years of *Australian Letters*, like 'Sturt at Depot Glen' and 'The Death of Bert Samanowsky', were an attempt to contribute to this strain in Australian culture.

*Australian Letters*, like earlier ventures by Max Harris, placed a strong emphasis on the visual arts, which was exploited with great distinction in the series of Australian poems illustrated by Australian artists published in the magazine. This reflected at least one significant change in Harris's attitude, for he generously included McAuley in the series. Since all the artists represented had by that time absorbed some of the innovations of contemporary art and McAuley was matched with Leonard French, it would be interesting to know what the opponent of modernism had to say about that.

*Australian Letters* deserves some credit for sustaining literature from the late fifties through to the period of new growth at the end of the sixties. Like many of Harris's projects, and other Australian little magazines, it generated off-shoots, like the annual collection *Poets in Australia*. This unpretentious publication records a transitional phase in Australian writing, when some of the poets now established were building their reputations.

After *Australian Letters* Max Harris started the first *Australian Book Review*. This was in many ways a livelier journal than its successor; less comprehensive and thorough, but on the whole more entertainingly written. My only other quibble with *Cross Currents* is that John McLaren might have given the first *ABR* fuller treatment in his piece on reviewing in Australia.

*Cross Currents* is a beautifully made book, with a stunning dust jacket, but it contains editorial lapses apparent even to a casual examination. These include misplaced footnotes like those on page 291 which attribute to Vivian Smith a book called *Australian Cultural Elites*, and the words of John Docker to John Docker. The index has been compiled by someone with a prejudice against the literature of the past. It lists none of the American writers mentioned in Elizabeth Webby's essay, like Longfellow, Emerson, Poe or Bret Harte. It does not even list D.H. Lawrence, an important figure in the essay on *Fiction*, and also to the Jindyworobaks. However, it does mention many of the American writers currently in vogue, for example Charles Bukowski, Robert Duncan, somebody called Glaway Kinnell, Jerome Klinkowatz and Richard Kostelanetz, amongst others. Some of these will no doubt be remembered as vividly as the Bryant and Halleck

who were cited as models for Australian poetry in the 1850s. The index has entries for a C.M.H. Clark, as well as for Manning Clark, and in addition to Patrick White, includes a Pat White, who turns out to be the author of *The Ploughman*. It appears that the Nobel laureate has at last been successful in divesting himself of his juvenilia.

BRUCE A. CLUNIES ROSS

## 'RELEARNING THAT COUNTRY' —

Les A. Murray, *The Vernacular Republic*, Poems 1961-81. Canongate, Edinburgh.

Les A. Murray, *Equanimities*. Razorback Press, Copenhagen, Denmark.

It's strange how orthodoxies develop. These days there seems to be a general feeling in the British Isles, that the most vital English-language poets around are Womers Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney. This may or may not be true but the assessment makes scant reference to the literatures of the big continents where English is spoken. Canadian and Australian poets are very little known in Britain.

Les A. Murray spent a year in Scotland on a writers' exchange scheme. The publication of his selected poems by the Edinburgh-based 'Canongate', in paperback, now makes his work readily available here. Previously my only knowledge of his work was through periodicals such as *Kunapipi* and the Edinburgh-based *Centaurus*. The latter printed 'Their Gides, Their Unvernities'. This poem shows how important Murray's family background is to him. He serves it well, with an accurate visual focus: 'The scrolls of their fiddles curl at me...' Recent and true history in a photograph. His ear is as good, as shown in line-lengths that have rhythms of speech and some direct quotes: 'Scotland is a place Dad goes to when he drinks rum.'

In their concerns with family, farms and people in relation to landscapes, Murray and Heaney have much in common. But the unabashed acceptance of the vernacular into his art, making a quality of roughness where the rhythms are heard as rough, is Murray's own tool: 'drought this year. Yes. Like trying to farm the road.'

This is a quote in italics but he also absorbs the spoken into a more worked line, and it can be gentle: 'They say pigs see the wind. You think that's right?' Here is a sensitivity to contrast with 'all that smart city life'

The same poem has his own sophisticated numerics, many of them to be found in his neat, three short-lined aphorisms. Some of the longer poems in short and wrought lines also stay with you: 'The Incendiary Method' for example. He is also capable of, and sometimes takes delight in, close-worked language, studded with exotic words. He can overdo it. 'SMLE' is a far-ranging poem, unified by the imagery of the rifle, but some individual lines seem to me too tricky: 'gill-furrows ravaged by specks/ their fins fibrillate.' Yet this example is followed by the simple and superb: 'They are swimming away in their muscles...'

Throughout this book is a healthy restlessness, in seeing and in language. Murray can range from Gallipoli, to a curry-restaurant in Cardiff or to his Gaelic inheritance. As a

Hebridean, I found his 'Gaelic Poems' and evocations of a Uist ancestry a bit romantic, but always there are some perfect lines: 'lamplight and wireless/ as I grew older.'

It is a huge body of work to come to terms with, all in one closely-printed volume and for that reason I think I gained more pleasure out of the Razorback Press's chapbook. Here the type, layout, and paper that asks for your touch, give space to what seems to me some of the finest poems from Murray's collection.

There is the craftsman's delight in unusual words with strong sound: 'spoor, gibbed, cusps, talus, grit'. This invites comparison with the language of Heaney's 'Field Work': 'putting, slug-horn, inwit, polder, stooking'. In 'Equanimities' the vocabulary and the varying, but usually ample, rhythms carry a sense of man affecting and being affected by, the nature he has not yet built-on. The poems have a religious scope but little to do with dogmas or millennia: 'there is only love; there are no Arcadias'. This line occurs in the speculative 'Equanimity' which ranges in the different layers of light and life above a suburb. Peace and patience are very different from inertia and compromise. The more mystical side is rooted in photographic accuracy: 'at telephone-wire/height above the carports...'

People work at the edge of the sea, the forest, the grasslands. Nature is far from passive. People use chain-saws on forest but 'whipsick saplings' are themselves out 'to shade the rest to death'. The kintrels in 'The Grassfire Stanzas' are quick to seize on 'the hopping outsiders' set moving by the men who carry 'smoke wrapped in bark'.

Only the suiciders who come by taxi to the edge at South Head seem quite sure why they've come but Murray has caught the curious and exciting need to walk out as far as we can go, on the prow of a continent.

IAN STEPHEN

## JEAN RHYNS| ENCORE UNE FOIS

Helen Nebeker, *Jean Rhys: Woman in Passage*. Montreal: Eden Press, 1981. 224 pages, paperback \$8.95.

Helen Nebeker has picked up the gauntlet that Jean Rhys threw down in *Voyage in the Dark* when Rhys had Maudie say, 'I bet you a man writing a book about a tart tells a lot of lies one way and another'. Discussing Zola's *Nana*, Maudie and the heroine of *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna Morgan, are about to set forth their own version of the life of a tart — a woman's version, the reply to a man's book about a tart. Nebeker takes the process a step farther in her book about Jean Rhys, *Woman in Passage*, because she has produced the first full-length study of Rhys' fiction by a woman. And in her book Nebeker responds to what she sees as distortions of Rhys' fiction by the male authors of earlier Rhys studies: Elgin Mellow, Thomas Soley and Louis James.

*Voyage in the Dark* serves as Nebeker's key to the riddles buried in Rhys' fiction — riddles that Nebeker believes are too easily glossed over by what is becoming a conventional reading of Rhys' novels as one long chronological case history of a generic heroine.

Probing after deeper levels of protagonistic self-discovery, Nebeker uses an uncompromisingly Jungian methodology to strip away the narrative sequence of Rhys' five novels to the discovery of an ancient fertility goddess who lies behind the hapless heroines of the Rhysian canon. Like the heroines of the novels, the primordial goddess (personified as Anna Morgan) has been frustrated in her procreative functions through male domination and manipulation; hence, *Woman in Passage* emerges as a passionately feminist reading of Rhys' fiction. The energy with which Nebeker delivers her feminist interpretation certainly surpasses Staley's somewhat topical allusions to 'the female condition', and her delving for mythopoetic archetypes is far more consistent than Peter Wolfe's generally psychoanalytic attempt to define structure and symbolism in his *Jean Rhys* published by Twayne.

Nebeker, who is Professor of English at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona, specialises (as do Wolfe and Staley) in contemporary British and American Literature. It is not surprising that Nebeker, Wolfe and Staley, writing from universities in the United States (Wolfe is at the University of Missouri, Staley is at the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma), tend not to place Rhys' fiction in the context of Commonwealth Literature. The cultural point-of-view in Nebeker's book insists upon the Victorian ethic of nineteenth and early twentieth century England rather than upon either the emanations of continental European attitudes found in Rhys' earlier novels or the expressions of West Indian concerns found in the novels and short stories. It seems almost a consequence of Nebeker's criticism of Victorian social and sexual mores that her book ends with an analysis of Charlotte Brontë's Victorian novel *Jane Eyre* rather than with the more usual analysis of Rhys' own *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Although Nebeker's scholarship is impeccable, her book would be improved by a less exclamatory style and a less dogged application of onomastics ('the magic of naming') to both major and minor characters in all the novels. Her search for Jungian archetypes seems to work best with *Wide Sargasso Sea*; there is less justification and defense in the *Wide Sargasso Sea* chapter than in some other chapters where apologies interrupt the literary analysis, introducing a suspicion of strain. In fact, Nebeker's defensive tone brings to mind the strategies of eighteenth and nineteenth century women writers, suggesting that Nebeker views herself as a potential victim of a male-dominated literary mode. It is sad that she is so consciously defensive when embarking upon an exegesis that she knows is feminist and that she undertakes through means associated with other feminist writers such as Phyllis Chesler. It appears that Helen Nebeker herself is like Jean Rhys: a woman in passage.

Professor Nebeker presented excerpts from her book on Rhys at the Jean Rhys Commemorative Colloquium held in New York City during the 1981 meetings of the Modern Language Association. Denied admission as a special session at the 1980 MLA meetings in Houston, Texas, the Jean Rhys Commemorative Colloquium gained admission in 1981 as a result of growing recognition in the United States of Rhys' literary stature. Chaired by Arne Shirley Buchanan of the University of Minnesota, the international panel included Dutch scholar Martin Kappers den Hollander of the University of Amsterdam who is working on Rhys' 'Dutch Connection' and Canadian scholar Joan Giver of the University of Regina who presented results of her work with the Jean Rhys letters at the University of Tulsa. In addition, Elaine Campbell of Regis College, Massachusetts, discussed Rhys' 'West Indian Connection'; Paul Delany of Simon Fraser University in British Columbia compared Rhys' version of the Rhys-Ford affair in *Quartet* with those of Edward de Nève in *Barred* and Stella Bowen in *Drawn from Life*; Marjha Cummins of Bronx Community

College in New York City presented a formal paper on 'The Effect of a Double Focus' in Rhys' novels; and Eleanor Gordon of the University of Illinois, Chicago, summarized a paper on 'Female Archetype and Myth in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*'.

ELAINE CAMPBELL

Earl Lovelace, *The Wine of Astonishment*. Andre Deutsch, London, 1982. 146 pp.

One of the major strengths of Earl Lovelace's work is his ability to deal with that most elusive quality, the spirit of a community, in encouragingly direct terms. Despite the frequently distressing nature of his tales of exploitation and persecution, his work is ultimately a celebration of the spirit of his fellow Trinidadians. The prevailing pessimism of his renowned fellow countryman, V.S. Naipaul, with whose early novels Lovelace's fiction has been compared, is missing in Lovelace's work. Exile is not one of the options his characters consider and so confrontation becomes inevitable, bringing with it that shred of hope that dignifies their struggle against the depredations of years of colonial rule.

Lovelace's latest novel, his fourth, takes as its theme the banning of the Spiritual Baptist Church in Trinidad. Within this apparently narrow framework, Lovelace manages to catalogue and dramatise many of the complex problems that have beset Trinidad in the twentieth century. The specific effects of the American presence on the island during World War Two are conveyed alongside more fundamental political truths, i.e. that no member of the population can escape the effects of political actions. The election of Ivan Morton, the local boy made good, by the villagers of Bonasse, and his subsequent self-imposed alienation from their interests proves to be an alarming object lesson in self-serving political ambition complicated by years of cultural imperialism. When Bee, the Church leader, goes to plead with Morton for the restoration of the Church's legitimacy he is told 'We can't change our colour ... but we can change our attitude. We can't be white, but we can act white.' The expression of cultural values is an integral part of the characters' need to find and maintain an identity under the most adverse conditions, a theme common to many West Indian novels. The values and roles depicted in *The Wine of Astonishment* are largely traditional: passive endurance and solidity, while seen as female strengths, are often viewed by the community as male weaknesses. The warrior-ideal still prevails, although the transmutation of macho consciousness is apparent in the influence of American culture. But when stickfighting is banned the description of mock battles with handkerchiefs becomes a symbol for the emasculation of a whole society. At this point Bolo, the champion stickfighter, emerges as a Christ-like figure whose sacrifice will remind the villagers of their drift away from what small shreds of identity they once had. But it is a typically futile gesture, frustration and humiliation explode into self-destructive violence. Whether this is because the action came too late or it was inappropriate in their changed society is not made clear. Lovelace prefers to describe rather than preach, as when the warrior loses his girl to the man of education with a fountain pen in his pocket, but we may infer that there is something simultaneously wasteful and yet necessary in Bolo's actions. More explicit is the sug-

gestion that the spirit of community, although curbed, cannot be destroyed. Self-expression and communal celebration, the essential concomitants of liberty, may therefore reappear in the spirit of the steel band after the so-called 'heathen worship' has been all but crushed.

Technically and stylistically *The Wine of Astonishment* provides ample evidence of Lovelace's growing assurance as a writer. The first person narrator, Eva, mother of five and wife of the church leader, is a convincing portrayal of that solidity that comes from hard work and belief in God. The story is confidently conveyed in dialect and one is reminded of the particular qualities of that technique when practised by such writers as Reid and Selvon; its immediacy, the avoidance of overt didacticism and the seemingly effortless shift from everyday speech to highly lyrical language. The writing also echoes the oral tradition of the black West Indian, a further reminder of the cultural heritage, when Eva describes events not witnessed at first hand but described to her. Accordingly this mythological quality in the narration creates an ambience that counterbalances some of Lovelace's excesses, for example, the tendency to make his symbols too explicit. There is a similar heavy-handedness in his use of irony but this is more than compensated for by an overriding sympathy for his characters that increases the reader's involvement. Lovelace's previous work, *The Dragon Can't Dance*, was an ambitious and generally successful quest for the spirit of the Trinidadian community. *The Wine of Astonishment*, although seemingly narrower in scope, is however a far richer and more thought-provoking work, giving evidence that Lovelace's stature as a major West Indian novelist is now confirmed.

PHILLIP LANGRAN

C.K. Stead, *In the Glass Case, Essays on New Zealand Literature*. Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press, 1981. 293 pp. NZ\$16.90.

It is a great satisfaction to have such a collection of essays for, although Bill Pearson's *Pretful Sleepers* (Heinemann, Auckland, 1973) was a landmark, it contained essays other than on New Zealand literature. Stead's volume is broad in outlook: it is divided into three sections which deal successively with the novel, poetry and finally a poet's perspective on New Zealand. The whole constitutes a valuable study of the writer/poet Stead while at the same it brings together a number of very perspicacious articles by the same critic.

Any reader who wishes to have a comprehensive view of the New Zealand literary scene would do well to begin by reading *In the Glass Case*. He will find both the classics and a number of lesser-known novelists and poets. Stead also discusses the works of authors who have not enjoyed the success they deserve at home, e.g. Sylvia Ashton-Warner.

Stead sets out and concludes by underlining the importance of personal involvement and the authenticity of the experience. He writes with discernment and is sometimes bitingly critical. He has no patience with those who pass judgement on works which, in his opinion, they have not really read in depth (Pleur Adcock's introduction to the review of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Sphinter* is the case in point).

In his search for the personal touch in any writer, Stead is especially sensitive to words, language and style. This sensibility leads him to rate Katherine Mansfield, Allen Curnow, Maurice Duggan and Janet Frame high on his list of preferences. Yet, as he points out, style cannot illuminate a lack of personal experience or its suppression in the writing, for style is, in effect, an artist's 'sense of life'. Consequently Karl Stead finds it difficult to sympathise with Flaubert, Fleur Adcock and, at times, Baxter.

Stead's analyses of pieces by other poets is as interesting for the examination of his own poems as for the works under consideration. This, I feel, is particularly true in his articles on Fairburn and Brasch. Stead is attracted to the spontaneous inspiration that Fairburn decries and for this reason R.A.K. Mason pleases; although Stead is able to recognise the value of Brasch's work he cannot really appreciate it.

The third section of this critical collection illustrates the specificity of New Zealand literature in general — the continuing preoccupation with isolation and distance, with images of arrival and departure tends to be less important because of the advent of improved travel liaisons but it is precisely this sensation of aloneness which has contributed to form a literary circle with all the advantages of contact and interchange as well as the inconveniences of inbreeding and promiscuity.

The great number of writers present on the Auckland University Campus as well as the library's collection of New Zealand texts 'in the glass case' were to have a decisive influence on the young Karl Stead. In turn it is certain that this collection of essays will be an important influence on future generations of students of New Zealand literature.

CAROLE DURIEX

Patricia Grace, *The Dream Sleepers and Other Stories*. Longman Paul, 1980.

From the beginning a painstaking writer, Patricia Grace has continued to refine her technique. In this book, she is rather like a painter who has moved into her abstract period. Her last book, the novel *Mtutukheku* (1978), was a departure from her natural field, the short story; if her novel was not altogether successful, Grace seems to have learned much from having somewhat misapplied her talents. In *The Dream Sleepers* she turns from sustained narrative and character development and concentrates on the sketch.

Grace deals mostly with simple scenes and situations, in accordance with her aim to present to a condescending and excluding Pakeha society the Maori way of life with its simple dignity. She does that by showing the Maori in the common activities of human life: going to school, playing children's games, growing into adolescence, dating, marrying, becoming pregnant and giving birth, growing old and meeting death. Most of her stories are set in rural areas, and the sea is never far away (Grace herself lives on the coast near Wellington). For the children life means taking care of the garden, looking after the cows, going fishing, and, less willingly, going to school. It is an idyllic life, and Grace herself is happiest in the idyll. There are few scenes of tension in her stories — perhaps too few, for she may to some degree be deferring to the White racist notion of the Maori as warm and simple people.

There are only two stories of the total twelve dealing with the striking difference in the values and the rights and privileges of the two races within New Zealand society: 'Letters from Whetu' and 'Journey'. Despite Grace's infrequent treatment of such themes (though she could not have avoided them altogether in recording the Maori experience), these stories are the strongest and most memorable in the collection. Perhaps because she was ill at ease in dealing with areas of racial tension, she is more than usually conscious of her technique in these stories. 'Letters from Whetu' consists of a series of letters by a Maori highschool boy, the Whetu of the title, written in class to fill in the school day; they are full of disgruntled comments upon the teachers as posturing or rambling on and upon the courses of study. Whetu's blotting out of the classes going on around him in favour of memory and anticipation of times spent with his Maori friends by the sea represents a rejection of Pakeha values by an intelligent Maori who is capable of disturbing Pakeha faith in their greater intelligence and stability if he wishes to. But he is no longer willing to graduate as an 'honourable statistic' of his race and go on to a dull office job (with, no doubt, limited chances of Maori promotion). Whetu's full name, Whetu o te Moana, was given to him in a gesture of obsequance to Pakeha culture — it translates Star of the Sea, one of the Catholic titles of the Virgin — but he himself is about to throw off the layers of Pakeha culture with which he has been swathed and opt for a Maori way of life in closer contact with the land and sea. But on the threshold of his adult life he faces not freedom but a life where he will have to face intensifying and multiplying racial tensions, and that is why this story is so disturbing.

'Journey' tells of a trip to the city by an old Maori man to convince Pakeha officials to allow his family to retain their land, which has been reclassified for restricted development and in time is to be taken over by the government. He begins the trip with a faith in the reasonableness of his position and in Pakeha willingness to reverse an eminently reversible decision, but returns with his faith shattered. Not only is he unsuccessful in his mission, but he learns at the meeting that the fertile land that has fed his family for so long is to become a parking lot, while the rocky land nearby is zoned for housing. In deepest defeat he cries out to his family at the end that he does not want to be buried on his land and suffer his bones to be disturbed later — but wants to be cremated.

We do not directly see the old man's meeting with the officials in this story, but learn of it as he relives the incident on the trip home. In this way Grace is able to reduce emphasis on his rage and concentrate instead on his sorrow and helplessness. The title of the story, too, deflects attention from the frustration of the meeting, directing it to the anticipation of the journey.

The last five stories in *The Dream Sleepers* — 'Kapa', 'The Pictures', 'Drifting', 'White-bait', and 'Kip' — form a sort of long short story. This sequence of five stories allows us to see Grace's chief weaknesses and strengths in miniature. One is aware of a thinness of narrative content in Grace's stories, in this third book even more than in her first book (*Waiwaka*), and of a weakness in portraying character development. Her talent is for short sketches, which she infuses with a great deal of charm and vitality. They glow with her Maori characters' fellowship and keen enjoyment of activities associated with the land and the sea. Grace's stories are deliberately limited in scope, at their best they attain a lyricism seldom matched in New Zealand literature.

ROSE MARIE BESTON



# Conferences

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## Australian Literature Seminar, University of Stirling, 9-11 September 1983

We intend to hold a seminar on Australian Literature at the University of Stirling from 9-11 September 1983. (Delegates should arrive during the afternoon of Friday 9 September and leave after breakfast on Monday 12 September. The inclusive cost of accommodation and all meals will be £80.) The general theme of the conference will be *Country and Suburbs in Australian Literature*. We expect to have contributions from leading Australian writers and scholars.

We are timing this seminar so that delegates can also have an opportunity to attend the Edinburgh International Festival (20 August - 10 September) and the Edinburgh Book Festival (20 August - 4 September), a new and exciting development with more than 9000 books on display as well as many events and attractions.

When the programme for the Australian Literature seminar has been put into a final state (we hope to receive an Australian Government Grant to aid us in bringing writers from Australia) we will send details to those scholars who have responded to the current enquiry about their likely interest in the projected seminar.

All enquiries to Professor A.N. Jeffares, Department of English Studies, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA, Scotland.

A.N. JEFFARES

## Australian Studies Seminar

There will be a two-day seminar on Australian Studies on Friday, 30 September and Saturday, 1 October, 1983. This will be jointly organized by Maggie Butcher of the Commonwealth Institute and Geoffrey Bolton of the new Centre for Australian Studies at the University of London.

Further information may be obtained from either of the above persons.

# Prizes and Awards

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## ACLALS (Europe) Short Story Competition

The European branch of ACLALS invites entries for its short story competition. Persons eligible are citizens of Commonwealth countries other than Britain (nationals of other countries living in Britain are eligible).

The prize money is 5,000 Danish kroner and there is an entry fee of 50 kroner. Three copies of each entry must be submitted and the organisers reserve the right to publish any entry in *Kunapipi*, the journal of the association.

Closing date for entries is 1 November 1983 and results will be announced in the Winter 1983 issue of *Kunapipi*.

Entries should be sent to The Chairperson, ACLALS (Europe), Department of English, University of Aarhus, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark.

## Commonwealth Poetry Prize 1982

The Commonwealth Poetry Prize, an annual award worth £500, has been won by Peter Goldsworthy of South Australia for his collection of poems *Readings from Ecclesiastes* (London, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1982).

## Commonwealth Poetry Prize 1983

The prize of £500 is awarded annually for a *first* published book of poetry in English by an author from a Commonwealth country other than Britain (nationals of other countries living in Britain are eligible).

Publishers are requested to submit titles published between 1 July 1982 and 30 June 1983. Five copies of each title, for retention by the Judges, should be received not later than 30 June 1983. Manuscripts cannot be accepted.

A brief account of the author's life and career should accompany entries, which should include the place and date of birth and current address. A recent black and white portrait photograph should also be sent if available.

Entries should be sent to: The Librarian (Poetry Prize), Commonwealth Institute, Kensington High Street, London W8 6NQ, Great Britain.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

*Jane Walker Leonard* lives in New Zealand. She is a full-time writer and illustrator, mainly for children. *S. Tunde Gandozz* lives in Calgary, Alberta. *Ken Duffin* lives in Guelph, Ontario. *Lesley Choyce* lives in Porters Lake, Nova Scotia. *Diana Brydon* teaches at the University of British Columbia. *Glen Sorested*, Canadian poet who lives in Saskatoon. *Ricci Cruz* attended the universities of Ceylon and London and now lives in Canada. *Sue Tharu* teaches at the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad. *Grace Nichols* is from the Caribbean and now lives in England. *Elaine Campbell* teaches at Regis College, Massachusetts. *Sam Maynard* lives in the Outer Hebrides where he is a staff photographer on the island newspaper. *Mark O'Connor's* third collection of poems is soon to be published by Hale & Ironmonger. He is presently writer-in-residence at James Cook University, Queensland. *Les & Pat Dobrev* teach at the Australian National University, Canberra. *David Puffer* is Australian. This story was one which received special mention in the 1991 EACLALS Short Story Competition. *Jennifer Straus* teaches at Monash University. Her most recent volume of poetry is *Winter Driving* published by Sierra Press. *Michael Thorge* teaches at Mount Allison University, Canada. His publications include *Dorn Leung's Africa*. *Michael Chapman* teaches at UNISA, Pretoria. *Tafolwa Manti* lives in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. *Chisodum Nwantho* is a Nigerian who has recently completed his doctorate at the University of Texas at Austin. *Jagrit Bhowmik* teaches in Sweden and is presently doing research on Ngugi at the University of Aarhus. *Bryan G. Tamauchi* teaches at Rhodes University, South Africa, and is editor of *Critical Arts*.

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EDITOR: IAN ADAM

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